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BUDGET GAMING

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demo cd



**"Take your stinking paws off me,
you damned dirty ape!"**

So what if that line isn't from King Kong, the movie, the remake(s), or this demo. Anyway, take control of Jack Driscoll and a bit of the big guy himself during this extremely short—but extremely impressive—demo. It's "cinematic" gaming in the extreme, but c'mon guys... let me use my entire display. And please don't use StarForce copy protection anymore (you've been warned; it's on the demo). Also this month: Who doesn't want to kill some zombies? That's the question answered by *Land of the Dead*. And take down some Messerschmitts in *Down in Flames*.

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Millions Can Be Wrong

And they can also be right. The mainstream, Nintendo, and Jerry Bruckheimer; tonight, on Mass Appeal Theater

by Steve Bauman



"Here's someone at the peak of his performing powers, making a serious statement: 'I'm popular!'"

When Elvis Presley called his second greatest hits record "50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong," he was on to something. Here's someone at the peak of his performing powers, making a serious statement: "I'm popular!"

He earned that right. But does it logically follow that anyone selling that many records or CDs is an amazing artist? We're talking the rarified air occupied by the likes of The Beatles, The Stones, Madonna, or Michael Jackson, before he started hanging out with chimps and Webster. And how about Garth Brooks? He's sold more records than The Beatles. Or Celine Dion? Do people run around saying, "Of course Celine Dion is an amazing artist. She's sold 20 million CDs, and 20 million people can't be wrong!"

Millions of TV viewers can't be wrong. If 20 million people watch *Lost* every week, that makes sense; it's a terrific show. And someone somewhere must like *According to Jim*; 10 million weekly viewers can't be wrong. Besides, why should its fans care if pointy-headed, goatee-stroking pseudo intellectuals think it's crap?

When it comes to movies, TV, or music, most people are comfortable with niche tastes, and many have open disdain toward more "mainstream" fare. It's typically perceived as dumbed down, developed for the lowest-common denominator, and driven by stereotypes.

With gaming, "mass appeal" is a considered a good thing. We all want to hop on board the popularity train. We use sales as a measure of quality, at least when convenient: Millions of *World of Warcraft* fans can't be wrong, but millions of *Myst* fans are; *Grand Theft Auto* fans aren't, but *Sims* fans are.

But why do we find "mass appeal" so... appealing? Why does anyone other than a game maker care whether a game sells? Do we want all decisions to be made with an eye on the sales charts? As the hardest of the hardcore, don't we want auteur designers? Why shouldn't we trust game makers to deliver interesting and playable games without interference? This isn't art-school weirdness; it's the idea that people like Sid Meier and Will Wright deserve to be left alone by marketing until they've delivered something fully formed, and hopefully brilliantly original.

But we're obsessed with sales and charts, with who's coming in first or has the highest rating. This drives us into this weird groupthink, where weird little games are inherently flawed. You end up with all sorts of caveats in reviews or during discussions;

"It's for serious fans of the genre only," or, "It's niche-y, but good." It's as if we're embarrassed that everyone won't like something.

We're also in denial when we think that compromises aren't made for "mass appeal." As soon as marketing is in on major design decisions, you get questions like these:

"Can that character be less ethnic? Can that character be more ethnic?"

"Can he be more gangsta? Can she be sassier?"

"I don't get this; what's the marketing hook?"

The people that ask these kinds of questions need to be fired, hopefully from a cannon. Into the sun.

This "mass appeal" topic came up recently during discussions about the Nintendo Revolution and its motion-sensing controller. Most repeated Nintendo's talking points: a gamepad isn't an intuitive controller (it isn't), and something that mimics natural motion will get more people playing games (we'll see). I'm curious about the controller—or more accurately, I'd like to see some actual games before I drink the "it's amazing!" Kool-Aid. But I'm skeptical that it will be more than a gimmick.

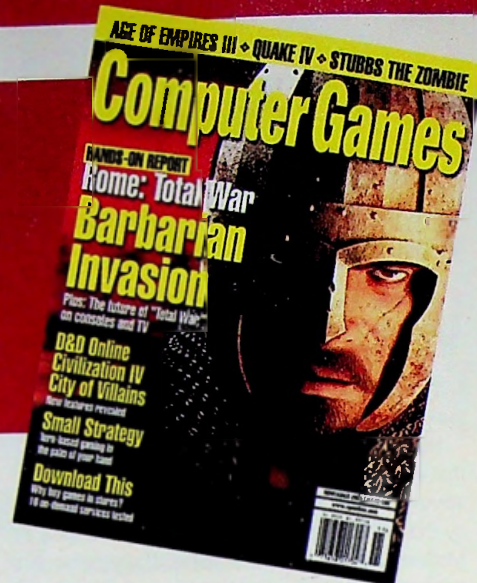
Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto told GameDaily.com: "Whether it's a new game or a sequel, we want anyone to be able to play right away." He went on to say: "[Videogames] should belong to the entire family. I want families to play videogames together. ... I redesigned the Revolution's controller to look more like a regular TV remote, so anyone who saw it would know instantly how to use it, and so they wouldn't think they had to always stash it away."

Ignoring the idea that there's little reason not to stash away a game controller when you're not playing a game—it's probably not going to double as a TV remote—the idea of bringing families together is a good one. It's also good business for Nintendo. But aren't we already seeing a generation doing this; my generation grew up with games, and we're passing it on to our kids.

Am I alone in not caring if my mom plays videogames? Maybe I'm selfish; I just want games designed for me. If no one else digs them, that's okay. I'll get over being *that* guy that likes *that* game.

Being for "mass appeal" gaming is like wishing every movie is a Jerry Bruckheimer/Michael Bay-styled explosion fest. It's hoping major corporations make more money by reaching more people, which is like rooting for the Yankees. Where's the fun in that? ■

We asked for feedback, and feedback was received. A few dozen people took the time to send in long and detailed comments about the magazine—a special shout out to those who wrote in from Uruguay—and it's much appreciated. Thanks to the input of those who wrote in, reports are being written, pie graphs are being cooked up, Excel spreadsheets are being calculated, and Powerpoint presentations are being created to determine our strategy for 2006 and beyond. It may involve a lot of black backgrounds with reversed-out type, or not. Continue sending your letters of love, hope, and devotion to editor@cgonline.com



Playing in a Boy's World

I felt the happiness of companionship reading November's "Speak Out" column "Playing in a Boy's World." I'm also a girl gamer, and have been since I dove into the world of *Daggerfall*. I haven't regretted it since.

And I agree with her completely. It's those little things—how your fellow male gamers tend to treat you "delicately," or the usual store experience where I ask "do you know where I can find (insert violent game)?" and I get the reply of, "Is that for your boyfriend?"

But I decided long ago that this is my hobby. And unfortunately, I'm in the minority. I'm willing to deal with that stuff as long as I can access my computer and my *Elder Scrolls*.

Fatma Alici

a girl. I think they've just known me for way too long.

Angela Marchand

As more guys get comfortable with women playing games, things will get better. But videogame design classes in high school... how cool is that? I had to take cooking and sewing. —ed

Space Rangers 2

I read your review of *Space Rangers 2: Dominators* in your November issue and I completely agree: it's by far one of the most enjoyable, well paced, and at times humorous games I've played in a long time. There's lots of variety, and never a dull moment.

However, it does come with two big

reply I got back is something I would have expected from a 10-year-old. In the end and thanks to my own troubleshooting, I determined that the problem was that StarForce doesn't check to see if a drive is active before it attempts to access or write data. When my hard drive spun down after an hour of play, StarForce decided there was no hard drive and dumped the game. This is the only program I've ever used that would be so stupid.

Peter Szymonik

Saved Games. Again

I have recently purchased *Dungeon Siege II* and don't find it fun at all due to the fact that I can't save the game anywhere I like. Why can't game developers let people who play on PC save the games exactly where they left off, like most games in the past?

David Luff

It's a good question: Why do developers continually try to reinvent the saved game system? —ed

Too Unreal

In your "Desert Island Discs" in November, you mentioned that you'd like to take *Unreal Tournament 2005*. Now that you mention it, so would I! Then I could be one of only two people to have that game. There's never been an *Unreal Tournament 2005*.

[Ci]PapăBear

*C'mon, he's using coconut-powered electricity. Let him enjoy his non-existent version of *Unreal Tournament*. —ed*



"I wrote the company asking for help with a StarForce problem, and the reply I got back is something I would have expected from a 10-year-old."

It's definitely hard to be a girl playing in a "mostly male" videogame world. As a female, I'm sometimes looked down on as a gamer. Right now, my high school has about 300 students and one videogame design class. Out of the 12 people taking it, only 4 are girls. (I'm one of them.) If more girls could get over that hurdle, there would be more games for girls.

But luckily for me, the guys I talk to about videogames don't really care that I'm

wants that prospective buyers should be made aware of. Number one is the insidious StarForce copy protection. It loads device drivers onto your machine without warning, and many people have complained about system problems, random reboots, and other ills caused by this copy protection.

Number two is that the tech support is incredibly bad. I wrote the company asking for help with a StarForce problem, and the

Chasing the Ghost

By Scott A. Steiner

“Where did it go?”

I often find myself asking this simple question. Merely doing so reflects my preternatural desire to figure out what happened to my obsession with computer games. I still love to read about them, but I can't seem to summon the interest to play all night anymore. Maybe it's because I'm 32. Maybe times have changed, and the youthful obsessions I once had with *Bard's Tale*, *Civilization*, *SimCity*, *Dune II*, and *X-COM* were just that: manifestations of youthful interest.

“But,” I ask myself, “must it be?”

I often look back with utter fondness on the endless hours I spent playing these and other great games. In fact, I feel as though I spend as much time reminiscing about them today as I spent playing them yesterday. I still buy games for my beloved PC. I try



“I’d rather chew broken glass than wander around Vegas all night, just to end my evening with a drunken visit to Denny’s as the sun rises.”

and I try to demonstrate that vigor I once showed. I settled down with *Nexus: The Jupiter Incident* a few months back and within a few hours of playing found myself falling asleep during the narrative cut scenes. Inevitably, in trying to solve this mystery, I ask myself whether I would have been head-over-heels for this game when I was 20. I just don’t know.

Is it just that I’d rather settle down with the wife and an evening of Netflix these days? As pleasant as that prospect is, of course (after all, she may read this), I don’t think that’s it. I still hunger to satisfy that craving. I still marvel at the incomparable excitement I used to feel when a downtown commercial district exploded with progress in *SimCity*, or when I successfully invaded and conquered an enemy city in *Civilization*. But these days, it seems like such... an effort. I can’t imagine staying up

until 4:00 AM to play computer games anymore. Especially when I’ve got a 6:55 AM tee time.

So all this leads to the question: Is the joy I once felt playing computer games relegated to my past? Unlike many of life’s youthful misadventures, this is one I’m not glad to leave behind. I still find myself “chasing the ghost.” I still try to recapture that feeling.

It’s strange, because I don’t mind leaving behind many other features of my youth. I really don’t have any desire to roam some bar or nightclub until 2:00 AM anymore. I think I’d rather chew broken glass than wander around Vegas all night, just to end my evening with a drunken visit to Denny’s as the sun rises. Nothing sickens me more than having to worry about making next month’s rent. I’d rather die than have to sit through another final exam.

There are tons of great things about being in your thirties: a satisfying career, vacations, home ownership, premium cocktails, money, a nice wife. Who wants to trade any of that in to return to the chaos of being 18 to 22? Don’t get me wrong, it was a wild time, and I’ll always look back on it fondly. But go back? No thanks.

So why is it I can’t quite shake this urge to stay up till all hours plotting my invasion of an enemy continent? And, more perplexingly, why is it that, given this desire, I can’t quite seem to satiate it? Did I change, or did the games? Surely, arguments abound for both hypotheses. Games today just seem different.

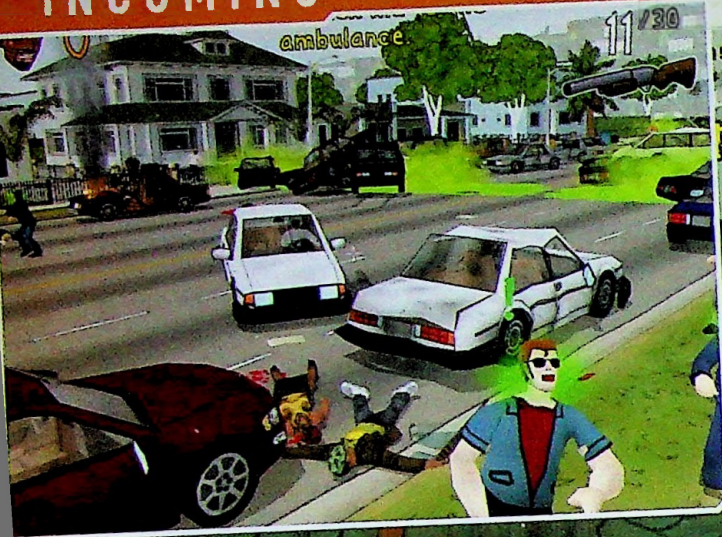
I know everybody’s gushing over MMOs. “How can you play those boring single-player games?” Having some early twentysomething pose this question makes me feel ever the codger. And I’m sorry, but I just don’t feel the need to hang out with a bunch of griefers 12 hours a day to have a great time with a

game. All those great games I mentioned above were single-player, and half of them almost kept me from graduating from college. When I bought *SimCity 4*, I felt like I needed a Masters in Public Administration to enjoy it. I don’t get it. Aren’t I supposed to get more patient with age?

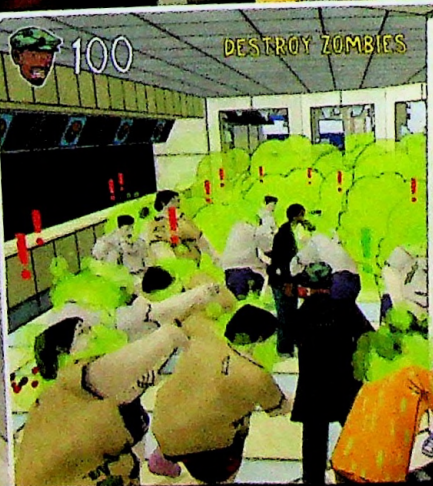
While playing those golden oldies, I remember thinking, “This will never get old.” I guess maybe the answer to my quixotic quest is that the games haven’t gotten old; I have. Whether that means the heady days of yesteryear are gone forever remains to be seen, but I’ll still keep chasing that ghost.

Do you have something to say? So say it! Send all topics and/or completed articles of no more than 800 words to editor@cgonline.com. Articles may be edited for space, or because we want to justify our existence by chopping your piece into little bits.

INCOMING



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City of Angels

Presenting **American McGee Presents: Bad Day L.A.**, the latest game presented by American McGee BY CINDY YANS

Developer **Enlight** Publisher **Enlight/TMIEC** Release Date **2006**

It's Like: South Park gone West

The Buzz: "You can ride a boustrophedon like a pendulum, but you can't get the wolf out of the womb that way." While that's not an American McGee-ism, it sort of represents his particular brand of absurdity.

Enlight's *American McGee Presents: Bad Day L.A.* is only McGee's second "realized" feature presentation (he doesn't count *Scrapland*), but he's gained a dose of "high profile" that just won't quit. And it's not just a matter of infectious enthusiasm; it's that, laced with a polished cynicism and a small dose of psychosis. Oh, and he has a really cool name. Enlight (*Seven Kingdoms*, *Restaurant Empire*, et al.) might seem to be a peculiar bedmate for McGee, but he's confident: "Eh, they're cheap. I'm crazy. It works."

Bad Day L.A. is a third-person action adventure, with a sick quality that says "Postal Lite." Its mechanics are far from laborious, in the hope of appealing to a more casual au-

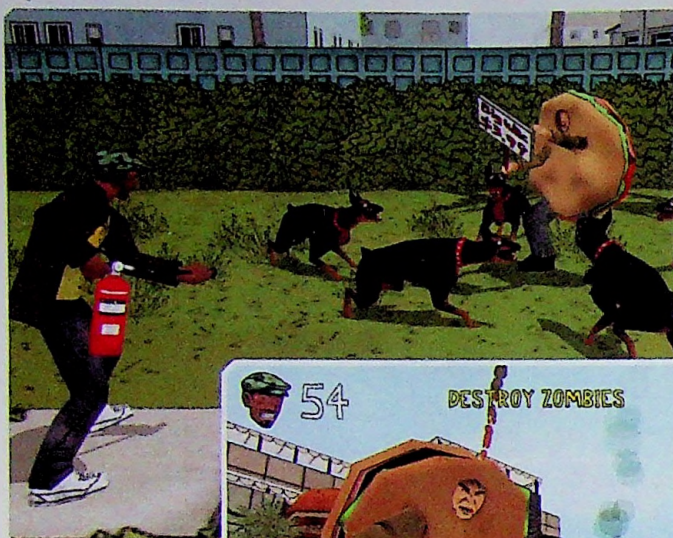
dience. "At our core, we—meaning I—tell stories," says McGee. "[The game should] appeal to the masses on several levels. This isn't another *Dungeons & Dragons*-type world, or one populated by large-muscled, machine-gun wielding guys and top-heavy girls. And this is a very 'old-school' game in

"This is a very 'old-school' game in the sense that it doesn't require you to use a 12-button mouse and have two left hands in order to have fun." —American McGee

the sense that it doesn't require you to use a 12-button mouse and have two left hands in order to have fun."

The "hero" is one Anthony Williams, a Los Angeles derelict whose sense of optimism has seen better days. We meet him as he takes a dump (sans Charmin) in the middle of rush hour traffic on a crowded freeway. Before long, a plane crashes into the freeway,





Attack of The Whopper. A Big Mac is never safe on the streets of L.A.

spewing toxic chemicals that turn people into infected zombies. Williams comes to the rescue, armed with a fire extinguisher that douses the burning masses.

This is the first of a chain of events the game uses to satirize both the disaster films of the 1980s and "catastrophe culture" in general. There are 10 linear missions, in real settings such as Hollywood Boulevard, Venice Beach, and

Beverly Hills, with a "save anywhere" function and five levels of difficulty. If you die while playing on "Easy," you return to exactly the same place. In higher levels, you return to the last save point, and at the

hardest level "the game electrocutes you and your computer bursts into flames," says McGee.

The artwork is beyond bizarre, in a flat and simple (but not simplistic) style by artists Kozy and Dan (Kozyndan), whose bio reads: "Kozyndan are Los Angeles-based mad scientists. They are working on a secret formula for controlled nuclear fusion, and are creating a line of edible chickens. For fun, they like to take long deep breaths and dip their heads into bowls of raspberry jelly and lemon curd."

But McGee's machinations are what, if

Supposedly, the main inspiration for the, shall we say, "high concept" for this game was a particular billboard.

I was driving down Sunset Boulevard, in Los Angeles, looked up, and saw a disturbing billboard. On it was a politically correct rainbow of people all looking very solemn. Over their heads was the statement: "Biochemical terror attack..." Below them the question, "Are you prepared?" This billboard, combined in my mind with what I then realized was a near constant stream of fear messaging from the world at large, served as the trigger for what would eventually become *Bad Day in L.A.*

Some of the violence is pretty horrifically over-the-top. There are limits, right? For starters, *Bad Day L.A.* doesn't allow you to sleep with hookers before killing them. In response to political pressure, we've eliminated the sexual element, allowing the player to go straight to the killing. We see this as a massive improvement in the genre and we think that politicians will agree. Outside of that, I think it is important to point out that this isn't a drive-around, run-around, sandbox-style game. It's a linear action game presented in a

American McGee Presents American McGee's Interview



style similar to titles like *Medal of Honor* or *Call of Duty*. Except our hero is homeless and smears dog shit on himself to scare away enemies.

It's obvious that it's aiming for a position high on the moral integrity meter. We realize that video games are getting a bad rap as being violent "murder trainers" and, like everyone else, are revolted by the idea that kids are using vibrating game controllers to rumble more than their hands. Hillary Clinton is so right: games inspire violence and sexual deviance! So, in response we've gone to great lengths to ensure that, between shedding innocent blood for laughs and setting old women on fire, the player can actually help people who are in need. That's right, if someone is on fire, even if you were the one who threw the Molotov cocktail that ignited them, you can put them out. If someone is bleeding, even if it's from a shotgun blast that you personally delivered, you can bandage their wounds. It's all about caring.

What do you think when people liken your style of dark comedy to Tim Burton's? That it is very flattering, but it puts way too much pressure on Mr. Burton.

anything, will "sell" the game. The other main heroes are Barf boy ("inspired by things like 'lone wolf and cub,' our existing zombie theme, 'Newt' from *Aliens*, etc."), Beverly ("pure Paris Hilton"), Sarge ("Sarge equals George Bush, except with only one arm"), and Juan ("Juan, well, he's just Los Angeles... the city would fall apart if all the Mexicans left").

McGee is, as you'd expect, enamored of all his boss characters and finds it hard to pick a favorite. "Well, we have a 100-foot tall zombie 'wac burger' guy; or the crazed theater manager who spouts MPAA rules; or the gang of prison fighters who wield deadly sea animals—sword fish, electric eels, starfish; or the TSA Guard boss who wants to give you a body cavity search and can only be defeated by being thrown into a running jet engine; or the gay drug gang boss whose brother you smashed with a wrecked train car? He's awesome. He wears a pink jumpsuit, and since our main character killed his brother, he wants to punish him 'long and hard.'"

The Xbox and PC versions should be identical, except that the console version will have a minor co-op mode in which the person riding shotgun can slightly influence the supporting characters. "You can basically guide them to their next target, really nothing else at this point," says McGee. "We might add more... not sure yet. It could easily become very *Gauntlet*-like. If we have time."

This is something that McGee has had a lot of while living in Hong Kong for the duration of this project—with few distractions. "To be honest, I don't even work on the same floor as the guys making the game. Their floor stinks, and it's hot."

Like a particularly bad day in L.A. ■



Commandos: Strike Force

So a spy, a sniper, and a green beret walk into a Nazi base. . . .

Developer Pyro Studios Publisher Eidos Release Date Summer 2006

It's Like: Those other WWII shooters

The Buzz: Talk about having your work cut out for you. *Commandos: Strike Force* hopes to reinvent the popular strategy/puzzle franchise and make an impact in the crowded (and possibly played-out) WWII first-person shooter battlefield. How do they hope to stand out in this packed game niche?

"Daring missions, silent kills, spying, sabotage," explains Eidos marketing manager David Bamberger. "This is the focus of the game's action and stealth play."

That stealth element, such a crucial por-

tion of the strategy titles, will be key here as well. Every character in the game—a sniper, a spy, and a Green Beret—is equipped with some sort of stealth ability. The Green Beret can sneak up on Nazis and slit their throat for a silent kill; the sniper hides and attacks from long range; and the spy utilizes disguise in infiltrating enemy installations. The disguise system is actually one of the game's more interesting features, with a disguise's success based essentially on rank—don an officer's uniform and only officers will have a chance of spotting your decep-

Call of Juarez

Developer/Publisher Techland Release Date 2006

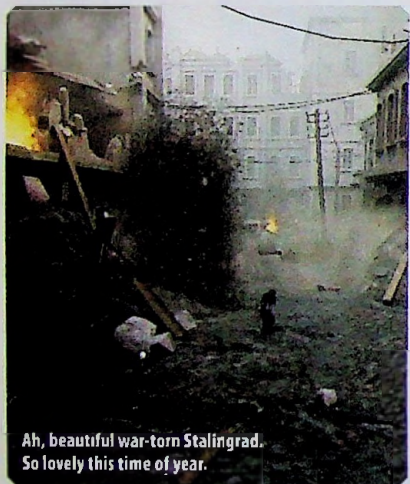
Techland, developer of games like *Chrome*, *Xpand Rally*, and *Gnat the Barbarian*, presents a first-person shooter that plunks you into the boots of Billy the fugitive, or Ray the bounty hunter, in the old days of the Wild Wild West. Built on the engine used for *Chrome*, it offers 12 "Dead or Alive" missions in classic Western settings, 18 weapons of the period, horseback riding, and saddle shooting (during which you presumably shoot saddles). A narrator in the game trailer notes, "Without are the dogs, and the sorcerers, and the fornicators, and the murderers, and the idolaters, and everyone that loveth and maketh a lie..." so you get to hide behind some feedbags and milk cans and blow them all to kingdom come, spaghetti style.



tion—enlisted personnel won't dare to challenge you. Take a grunt's uniform, however, and virtually anyone will see through it.

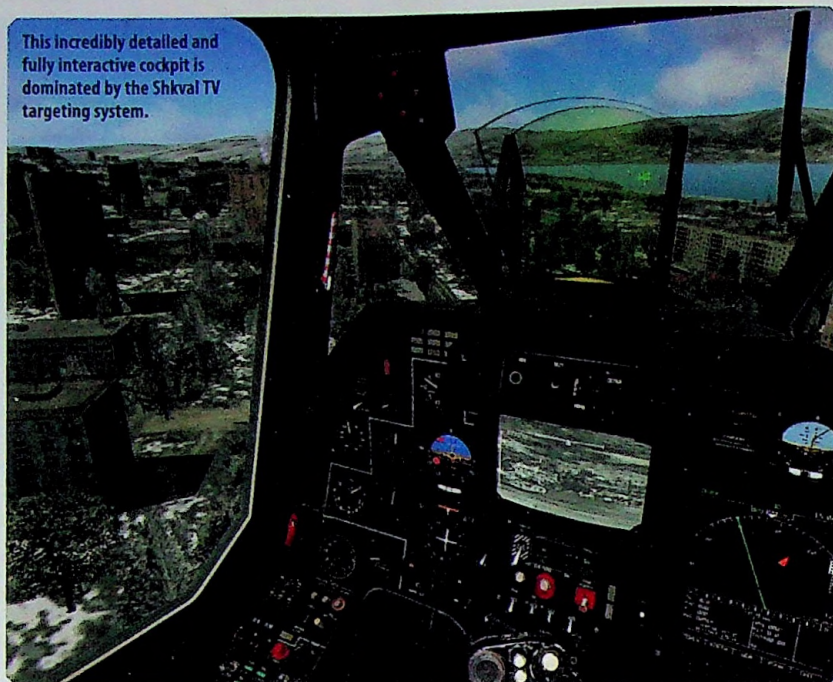
All this stealth stuff shouldn't imply that there isn't plenty of good, old-fashioned violence. There will be lots of shooting action throughout the game's 14 levels, with the action taking place during early 1942 in France, Norway, and Stalingrad. What actually may make *Strike Force* stand out—even more than the stealth—is the ability to toggle between characters. While most of the levels will have you guiding one character through, some will let you take two teammates. A quick smack of the Tab key bounces you back and forth, letting you use your sniper to soften up defenses before jumping to the Green Beret to wipe out the rest of the enemy. A line-of-sight and proximity based AI will let "unmanned" characters defend themselves when you're busy elsewhere.

Can such a radical re-imagining work? It's hard to say—for every successful *World of Warcraft*-ian reinvention, there's an *X-COM Alliance*-caliber bust. —Robert Coffey



Ah, beautiful war-torn Stalingrad. So lovely this time of year.

This incredibly detailed and fully interactive cockpit is dominated by the Shkval TV targeting system.



Lock On: Black Shark

Turnin' and Burnin' in the Ka-50

Developer/Publisher Eagle Dynamics Release Date Spring 2006

It's Like: Red Thunder

The Buzz: Helicopters in *Lock On: Modern Air Combat* are little more than annoying little blips to be swatted down for fun while you're flying toward more important things. *Lock On: Black Shark* is about to change all that by adding a flyable Ka-50 Black Shark helicopter to the *Lock On* stable, putting players in the seat of one of the most formidable attack choppers ever fielded as they fight through two 30-mission campaigns.

Eagle Dynamics, developer of the original simulation and its detailed *Flaming Cliffs* ex-

pansion, is aiming high with its latest release. "Currently, *Falcon 4.0* and *Jane's F/A-18* are considered the benchmark in avionics fidelity," says Eagle Dynamics Director Igor Tishin. "Ka-50 will exceed this."

The Black Shark is famous for its ability to make flat turns throughout its entire speed range, as opposed to helicopters with tail rotors that can only do this at extremely low speeds. The best example of this ability is a maneuver called "the funnel," where the Ka-50 keeps its nose pointed at a fixed ground target while flying circles of varying size at vary-

Rainbow Six: Lockdown

Developer/Publisher Ubisoft Release Date Early 2006

The PC will finally see another installment of the *Rainbow Six* series in 2006 with *Lockdown*. Ubisoft says this isn't a port of the console version and will feature slight changes to the main campaign, improved graphics and AI, more weapons, plus a lot of tweaks to the multiplayer. It will have 16 missions, all of which can be played co-op, and nine multiplayer-only maps. A new "Free-for-all" game type, multiplayer classes, and three classic maps from the earlier games—747, Mint, and Bunkers—round out some of the new features.





ing heights and speeds. Tishin says that the flight model in the sim is accurate enough that players will be able to pull off these types of maneuvers. All AI-controlled aircraft in the game use this flight model as well, and improvements are being made to the AI so helicopters and low-altitude anti-aircraft equipment attack and defend more realistically.

The damage model also is tweaked well beyond its original fidelity, matching or exceeding the excellent model used in *Flaming Cliffs*. Damage to the fuselage, tail, landing gear, wings, canopy, and rotors is all handled separately, with appropriate systems breaking down according to the location of the hit. That's just the kind of realism you look for in a helicopter sim since you are most likely to get hit from small-arms fire or other relatively small rounds that aren't as devastating as a missile up the tailpipe.

The success of the changes being made to the game engine is purely hypothetical at this point, but there's no denying the attention to detail in terms of graphics. The landing gear has working shock absorbers, the weapons racks depress slightly just as they do on the real aircraft, and rotor pitch is fully animated, but the real magic is in the virtual cockpit. It's nearly indistinguishable from photographs of a real Ka-50 cockpit and the mouse cursor can be used to interact with nearly every knob, switch, and button you see. All of the avionics found in the Ka-50 are there, including the Shkval-V television targeting system featured in the Su-25T

modeled in the *Flaming Cliffs* expansion.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the virtual cockpit is its 6DOF (six degrees of freedom) support for players with TrackIR 3 head tracking hardware from the Vector Expansion. This setup lets players lean in to get a closer view of the cockpit instruments and look through the heads-up display, tilt their heads to peer over the side of the chopper, or sit up straight to get a better view over the nose.

All weapons used in the real helicopter are modeled in the game and use the advanced ballistics model seen in *Flaming Cliffs*. A collision model has been added for trees, and FARPs (Forward Arming and Refueling Points) are now available for those long missions. "Each FARP will support up to four aircraft and they will have realistic infrastructure, including mobile tower, fuel vehicles, weapons depot, guard units, and lighting," says Tishin. "Rearming will probably take 2-3 minutes and refueling time would depend on initial fuel level."

Because of the complexity of the cockpit and the helicopter model Eagle Dynamics predicts that system requirements at full detail will be approximately 20% higher for *Black Shark* than they were for previous versions of *Lock On*. Everything is completely adjustable, of course, and there's a "newbie" difficulty mode for those who don't want to deal with the juggling act of flying a modern combat chopper, so everyone should be able to strap in when *Black Shark* leaves the hangar in the first quarter of 2006. —Tracy Baker

NFL Head Coach

Developer/Publisher EA Sports Release Date Spring 2006

Dubbed "the first 3D sports strategy game," this is a GM/coach simulation, more *Front Office Football* than *Madden*. Learn the intricacies of the salary cap, negotiate with free agents, and use a "simple conversation system" to coach your team to victory. Sounds... interesting.



Zero Tolerance

Developer Rocksteady Publisher Eidos Release Date Spring 2006

It's a game even a Senator could love: the thugs in this game aren't the heroes; they're the bad guys. While most right-side-of-the-law shooters have become one-shot-one-kill technical simulations, *Zero Tolerance* asks players to settle for simple, constant action as they empty entire clips into the torsos of terrorists and criminals. Civic good is a strong undercurrent in the shooter as you'll spend a lot of time protecting firemen, paramedics, and other first-responders. While ostensibly set in the present day and stocked with real world weapons, the feel isn't exactly realistic—in one level the police station besieged by a gang called the Burners, a mob that favors fire bombs and power tools.





Simple controls make dogfighting much easier here than in IL-Sturmovik.

Battlestations Midway

A fleet of one

Developer Mithis Games Publisher Eidos Release Date Summer 2006

It's Like: Battlefield 1942, in the Navy

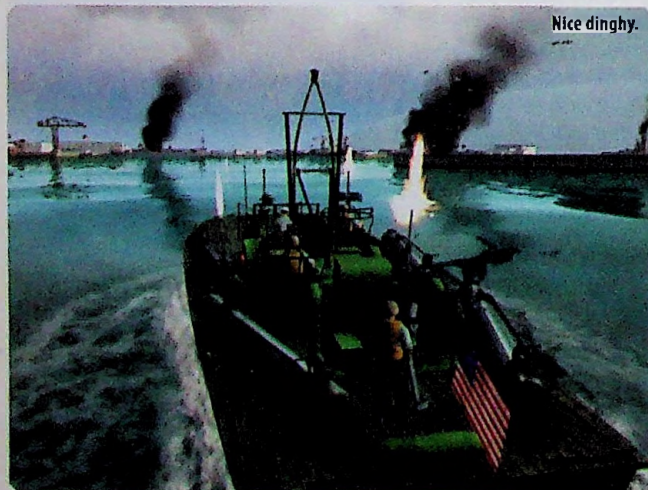
The Buzz: Gareth Rasay, an Eidos PR Manager from the UK, isn't rude. On the contrary, you can tell he'd really like to make eye contact when discussing *Battlestations Midway*, but he's just finished a B-17 bombing run and now he's in the middle of piloting a dive-bomber to finish off the airbase on Turagi. And after that, he's got to jump back to his aircraft carrier and fly a torpedo bomber to take out a Japanese destroyer approaching his squadron. So while he'd

honestly like to tear his eyes away from the monitor to discuss the AI, he's playing this mission the best he ever has.

"The AI is very good on defense, not so good on offense," explains Rasay, switching to "torpedo cam" to experience his aquatic bomb's race to the destroyer's bow. "We don't want the game to play for you but we wanted things to be there when you got back to them."

It makes sense. *Battlestations Midway* gives you hands-on control over every unit

in 11 signature WWII battles in the Pacific theatre (12 other challenge missions are unlockable). Simple controls and forgiving steering mechanics aim to make hopping from sub to ship to plane a snap. It better be easy to master considering each side in a conflict can have between 20 and



Nice dinghy.

FIFA Street 2

Developer/Publisher EA Sports
Release Date 2006

Four-on-four hit the streets in this arcade soccer game where humiliation is king. The new Trick-Stick Humiliation system lets you create combos that will execute specific tricks "to intimidate and disgrace your opponent." You'll attempt to beat the best in the world by traveling to a bunch of international locations—from London's Westway Leisure Centre to the beaches of Brazil. One-on-one contests culminate in meta-game "beat battles," which require both players to use the humiliation weapon on each other. Then you can use the redesigned Gamebreaker Trauma finishing move to really kick some butt. A trick meter fills up each time you show up your opponent, and when it's fully charged, it unleashes some hard-hitting trick combos.



30 units active at a time. That said, you won't have to man every unit to win the hour-long missions—a strategic overhead map will let you issue orders to your forces as well.

"We've got lots of multiplayer options," Rasay says. "Up to eight players, four per side." Instead of every player jumping around madly, you'll instead command one portion of the total units, i.e. you control the airfield while a teammate commands the ships. Along with the expected deathmatch variations is Rasay's favorite mode, Island Capture, a cat and mouse match hinging on expertly timing the deployment of mission-critical landing craft—release them too early and they get wiped out, wait too long and the other player will seize the objective.

We'll know in 2006 if *Battlestations Midway* is too much, too simple, or just right.

—Robert Coffey

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CREATIVE



Blizzard



The schwag! The LANs! The lines! The angrily chanting murloc protester! On October 28-29, the Anaheim Convention Center hosted the glamour, pageantry, and sporadic technical snafus that summed up BlizzCon 2005. The world will always be the same.

Although Blizzard's games have been universally associated with polish, humor, and casual brilliance, one of the biggest surprises of BlizzCon was how raw and half-assed it felt as a catered event. Although sold out weeks in advance, which rendered the head count academic, seating was hard to come by, line queues overflowed and intersected in endless caducei for every event except the panels. There was a general sense of weariness, uncertainty, and confusion, along with flashes of incompetence at crowd control (which one Blizzard staffer cleverly spun with a dopey shrug into: "We didn't know so many people liked us!").



of Con

Despite some rough edges, Blizzard's maiden effort at celebrating itself, BlizzCon 2005, still proves its worth to an estimated 8,000 fans used to waiting
BY KELLY WAND



One attendee's remark to the dude distributing goody bags that he hadn't gotten his raffle ticket was met with a genial, "Yeah, lotta people didn't." The company most renowned for rewarding its subscribers with nifty, charming, holiday-themed treats didn't think to include anything edible for the \$120 general admission, and the pickings were stingy, scarce, and often prefab. Eighty-dollar board games were on hand but not for sale (although they looked worth it). Patrolling fun police kicked lollygaggers off of the playable expansion demo for the Blood Elf newbie zone Sunstrider Isle once the allotted hour was up, even late into the evening amidst

dozens of unoccupied machines.

Still, most attendees convincingly claimed to have gotten their money's worth, despite doing virtually anything entailed standing in an hour-long line. At least there was a wide range of compelling activities to wait for, from Ping-Pong, rock-climbing a plastic replica of Blackrock Spire, and "jousting" with big foam rubber lances. There were also competitive matches of *WarCraft III*, *World of Warcraft: Battlegrounds*, classic *Starcraft*, and Blizzard's upcoming console-only *Halo* pastiche *Starcraft: Ghost* against attendees, pros, and even the games' designers.

Strength, Honor, and Uber-Micro Friday night's talent competition was a generally engaging blur of T&A, genuinely funny fan-made movies, not so funny fan-made songs, and everyone and their grandmother doing murloc impersonations. This was all performed under the cataractal gazes of the convention center's brigade of kindly faced uniformed ushers in their 70s and 80s wearing oversized admiral's hats. (One softly confided, following a particularly impassioned gurgle from the stage, that his hopes for the current performer's prospects were "dimming.")

Saturday night's finale concert was enlivened somewhat by the few dozen teens and 20-somethings slam-dancing with abandon in the mosh pit to the haunting metal strains of Level 60 Elite Tauren Chieftain's provocative ballad "Power of the Horde." After this came a few minutes of generic shtick by New York-based comedian Christian Finnegan, followed by an hour-long wait before The Offspring waltzed onstage (whose bellows of, "Yeah! Online gaming!" and "We grew up here, and now here we are!" suggested few members of the band had acquired their epic mounts yet). The band abruptly waltzed off stage about 40 workmanlike minutes later.

BlizzCon's most dramatic moments were provided by the players themselves, particularly in the insouciant form of the RTS gladiators who competed in the *WarCraft III* and *StarCraft* invitationals for jumbo-



From concept to reality, or at least unreality: The new environments look fabulous.



called out the play-by-play with the rising intensity of a tornado. Daring playing styles—an 8th level Pit Lord vs. a 6th level Alchemist?!—razor-sharp escapes, and masterstrokes of unparalleled cleverness (note to self: raiders need nerfing) ex-

"...confirming weeks of rumor and hearsay, Blood Elves will become a new playable race for the Horde."

sized \$10,000 checks and a trophy that consisted of a gleaming silver broadsword sunk halfway to the hilt inside a giant chunk of white basalt like Excalibur. An ocean of at least 4,000 faces stood or sat transfixed by the split-second finesse and epic battles unfolding on the Jumbotron, while a charmingly breathless but knowledgeable female emcee named Bunny

ploded in a final two-game bloodbath between finalists and real-life friends Grubby and Zaxard. It left everyone present feeling drained, scarred, and humbled, our retinas scorched from staring into whirling twin suns of sheer prowess, until one finally went supernova.

That's right gang: the greatest living *WarCraft* player on earth is... Dutch!

An Expansion Due... Sometime The main course was the unveiling of the upcoming *World of Warcraft* expansion, *The Burning Crusade*. Based on the preponderance of concept art in the movie ad, and the terseness of a solitary Q&A session held for the press (itself top-heavy with lengthy, incomprehensible inquiries by European journalists in thick sloshy accents that seemed to occasionally stupefy Blizzard Creative Director Chris Metzen and Senior Designer Jeffrey Kaplan), the expansion currently remains in a pupa state. Yes, the level cap will be bumped from 60 to 70, jewelcrafting and socketed items will give enchanters even more to bitch about and, confirming weeks of rumor and hearsay, Blood Elves will become a new playable race for the Horde.

Few attendees professed surprise by the Blood Elf announcement, although many

questioned why a race that fought on the side of the Human Alliance in *WarCraft III* would now be considered friendly to the Horde, especially when the looping movie playing onscreen in the background refers to the undying enmity the Blood Elves feel for these so-called allies.

Blizzard's unflappable Chris Metzen's response to this continuity lapse is that the intricate *WarCraft* lore is constantly evolving and mutable, just as in literary fiction. "No longer trusted by the Alliance," the Blood Elf race has joined the Horde to hunt down the demons that ravaged their homeland of Quel'Thalas and ravaged Azeroth known as the Burning Legion.

This One's For the Ladies However, more than one attendee speculated the real reason has nothing to do with lore "borrowed from Piers Anthony" and everything to do with wanting to hook more female players into going Horde, which to date has been composed of "ugly" races. Although Blizzard deigned not to reveal the new race for the Alliance, it vociferously denies that it'll be the widely rumored Pandaren, a race first introduced in *WarCraft III* in the form of a character who was decidedly friendly to the Scourge, agnostic to the Burning Legion, and hostile to the Forsaken. Or maybe the reverse. Confused yet?

Despite introducing a common enemy into the mix, the developers claim one goal for the expansion is to heat up what so far has been a notable lack of friction between Horde and Alliance. Still, both factions will (possibly) need to work in concert to open the Dark Portal in the Blasted Lands to access the expansion's new otherworldly regions: the inter-transdimensional Outlands, demon-infested nether regions last visited by players in the *Frozen Throne* expansion for *WarCraft III*. It's also home to instances like Hellfire Citadel (level 60+) and Tendris Keep (level 70).

In addition to the Outlands, the expansion will also let players finally explore Quel'Thalas, the apparently restored and thriving Blood Elf capital lying to the northeast of the Forsaken Lands, as well as the entire continent of Northrend, including the site of the actual Frozen Throne and its undead paladin turned death knight Arthas. Flying mounts will also be available to serve as principal means of commute throughout the Outlands. New instances, from the bite-sized to the gargantuan, will include Karazhan, a chamber of horrors located in

what was once the tower of the mad sorcerer Medivh, a central figure in *WarCraft* lore and the subject of at least one hastily written franchise novel.

There are no plans to add new classes, unless you count the "hero classes" they've barely begun tinkering with, but four to five new spells will be available for characters over level 50 to "help fill the gap," in addition to new tiers in the talent tree (and more points to assign between levels 60 and 70).

Patch Adams Meantime, the upcoming 1.9 mega-patch will offer new instances BlizzCon made available for a quick test-drive, such as the 40-person "Temple of Ahn'Qiraj," a sprawling edifice that dwarfs any current zones in acreage or complexity (think Disney's Haunted Mansion, but scaled to such immensity it makes Dire Maul look like Ratchet). Players will also be able to compete on new Battleground maps, including reprisals of epic historic engagements, by en-

[right] The female Blood Elf, AKA "The Hottie of the Horde" [below] Dragons should provide more challenges for high-level players.

tering the Caverns of Time.

The developers also claimed they're committed to figuring out new and better ways to integrate Battleground results into the game's overall framework, and for them to have greater bearing on the game universe. One favored notion is to create a Battle.net-style scoring system that keeps track of player ratings from arena to arena.

Finally, the team promised to make more visually stimulating, better scripted, task-oriented instances like the recent Zul'gurub and fewer to none like the excruciatingly linear and psychically punishing Molten Core.

As for costs, release dates, public beta testing, and the future of BlizzCon in general, the response was pretty much, "Stay tuned." ■



NEWSBYTES



Daikatana Still in the News—You can't keep it down; it keeps popping back up, kind of like chili. Dominus Animae announced the release of the soundtrack for John Romero's infamous opus *Daikatana*, nearly six years after it shipped to near universal derision. (The music, however, was pretty good.)

According to the site, "Music is the pinnacle of art. It rests alone upon its windy precipice, atop the mountainous edifice of man's artifice, the best vehicle of emotional expression." If you're interested in scaling that particular rock, head on over to dominusanimae.com...

Smoking Boll—"Filmmaker" Uwe Boll—of *House of the Dead*, *Alone in the Dark*, and *BloodRayne* notoriety—announced that the story of *Dungeon Siege* is so large, it will need two movies. The saga, dubbed *In the Name of the King: A Dungeon Siege Tale*, is slated for release in November and December of 2006.

Boll has also signed up to produce a movie based on *Postal*, which seems like a match made in heaven.... **EA and 2K Sign Everything**—EA picked up the license for *The Simpsons*, and plans on producing games for "next-gen systems." 2K Games announced it signed *The Da Vinci Code*, which should make them even more popular with religious groups. The game version is being pro-



Apocalypse Marketed

Left Behind: Eternal Forces bleeds a lucrative franchise to life

A decade ago, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins co-wrote a book that few realized would take the world—especially the Christian world—completely by storm. Billed as an apocalyptic thriller, *Left Behind* is the first of 12 books that chronicle the events surrounding The Rapture. (As legend has it, that's when all "true believers in the word of Jesus Christ" disappear from the face of the earth to claim their just reward, leaving the rest of us to flounder about until we clean up our acts.) In 1991, Troy A. Lyndon and Jeffrey S. Frichner co-founded Left Behind Games after realizing that no one had yet marketed high-quality videogames to a huge potential audience—the *Left Behind* readers, and the millions of folks who purchased copies of *The Passion of the Christ*.

Left Behind: Eternal Forces is a real-time strategy game that will put you in charge of a classic face-off between good and evil on the streets of New York City. "The reality of deception from the anti-Christ, as told in the fictional *Left Behind* series is that a world leader will emerge, with amazing wisdom and potentially even supernatural power," describes Lyndon. "To those

"Rather than cutscenes, you'll be treated to some quality Christian music and a prophetic verse..."

—Troy A. Lyndon





Experienced 3D Max and Maya artists make up the design team; some coming from previous games, others from an architectural background.

who aren't prepared by this deception, they won't know how to respond when their faith—or lack of it—is put to the test. In the game, there is constant competition for neutral units between the good guys, the 'Tribulation Forces,' and the bad guys, the 'Global Community Peacekeepers.'"

Single-player mode is mission-based, and as in most RTS games, there's a fair amount of resource management, which, in this

case, include Spirit, Money, Housing, and Food. The basic idea here is to convert secular or neutral units to fight on the light side or the dark side. On eight different maps detailing parts of Manhattan, you'll buy and sell real estate, build a resource generation system, and go to war. How you control your units will affect their statistics; for example, if you've converted



QUOTABLES

"Sorry, but the whole Women In Games thing makes me really angry. And not just during a certain time of the month."

—Lisa Foster of MCV magazine, in an editorial for Next-Gen.biz

"It seems it was Only last night that Richard and I laughing hysterical at a blue-haired gnome sitting in Goldshire flat on his bum, tossing his hands in the air with fervent abandon as her spoke each word."

—From the homepage of WoW Vault, a subsidiary of IGN. News Corp. paid \$650 million for IGN to acquire content like this.

NEWSBYTES



ducing by The Collective, with design work from Charles Cecil of *Broken Sword* fame.... **D&D & PDF**—In a match made in acronym hell, Paizo Publishing announced it's selling *Wizards of the Coast* PDFs on its website, paizo.com. The selection includes the entire catalog of 1st and 2nd Edition *Dungeons & Dragons* and *AD&D* products, at a lower cost than their dead tree cousins. In addition to *D&D*, Paizo is offering selections from the *Alternity*, *Gamma World*, *Gangbusters*, *Amazing Engine*, and *Dragonlance Saga* systems.... **Sports Game Predicts Future**—EA Sports ran the 2006 NBA season through the simulation engine in *NBA Live 2006* and actually issued a press release with the results. Amazingly enough, it even warranted this news item. The Spurs win! The Spurs win! Allen Iverson is the MVP and gets fined a record number of times for violating the new dress codes! Kobe Bryant wins the scoring title and continues to alienate his teammates! Tim Duncan is really, really, good! Now you can go back to ignoring the NBA.... **E.T. 2008: Back for Vengeance**—Electronic Arts and Steven Spielberg are teaming up to develop three original video-games. Spielberg will work with EA's Los Angeles office to "offer his signature style of storytelling to the concept, design, story and artistic visualization of the new games." Spielberg, who regularly



NEWSBYTES



attends the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo with his kids and was involved with the initial design of *The Dig*, feels that EA is a good match. "Having watched the game industry grow from a niche into a major creative force in entertainment, I have a great deal of respect for EA's understanding of the interactive format. I'm looking forward to working closely with the team in Los Angeles." And EA loves him right back. "In addition to his gift for pleasing movie audiences, he has an innate understanding of games and how to immerse players into a fantastic world of action and characters," said EA chairman and CEO Larry Probst....

Elevating BioWare and Pandemic—After a failed purchase of Eidos, the private equity firm Elevation Partners—one of its primary gadflies is some guy named Bono, from some band named U2—announced the formation of a partnership with BioWare and Pandemic Studios. It creates a holding company, BioWare/Pandemic Studios, comprised of management from the three principals. The \$300 million deal puts the four founders of the two companies—Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka of BioWare, and Josh Resnick and Andrew Goldman at Pandemic—in the senior executive role in the new business. Employees of both companies also get an ownership stake in the new holding company. The cash infusion will let both companies ramp up production for next-gen systems. And they probably get free U2 tickets....



someone into a "good guy," and his spirit points dip below 60, he becomes neutral again and you lose control of him. At this writing, there were no details about how multiplayer mode will work.

In the game's intro, the main characters from the books set up the storyline, and then become accessible in the buildings you can select and control; they can give you hints, tips, and encouragement. They've decided not to use video sequences to segue between missions.

"Rather than cutscenes," says Lyndon, "you'll be treated to some quality Christian music and a prophetic verse relevant in helping you to find out what is really going on in this post-apocalyptic world."

Left Behind Games has only 10 employees in the United States, with over 40 more scattered throughout at least three other countries. "Our business model is one where we have built the infrastructure of a multi-million dollar business, without the overhead," says Lyndon.

Most so-called "Christian Games"



Spirit, Money, Food, and Housing are the main resources you'll need to control.

(*Catechumen, Interactive Parables*) are not really up to par with today's mainstream titles, either technologically or content-wise. Lyndon truly believes, though, that this game and its proposed sequel(s) will be on par with the contemporary titles that attract hardcore gamers.

"We have a much bigger budget than those games, and our team is made up of experienced gamers and developers," he says. "Our game is one that's made for the mainstream, but will appeal to Christians as well. Not the other way around." —Cindy Yans

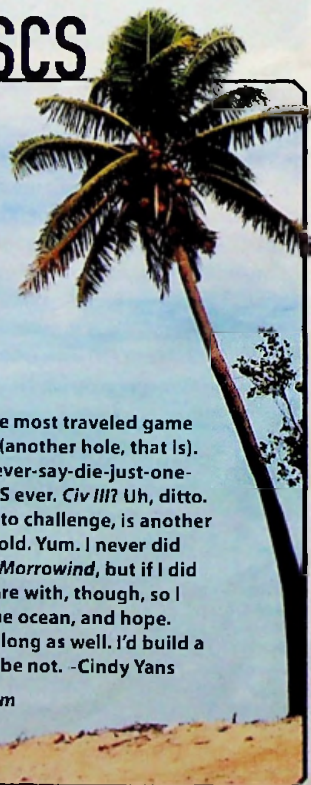
DESERT ISLAND DISCS

You're stuck on a desert island. There's no Internet, but there apparently is coconut-powered electricity. You can't train monkeys to play LAN games. So what five games do you bring?

Heroes of Might and Magic III
Civilization III
Bookworm
Morrowind
RollerCoaster Tycoon 3

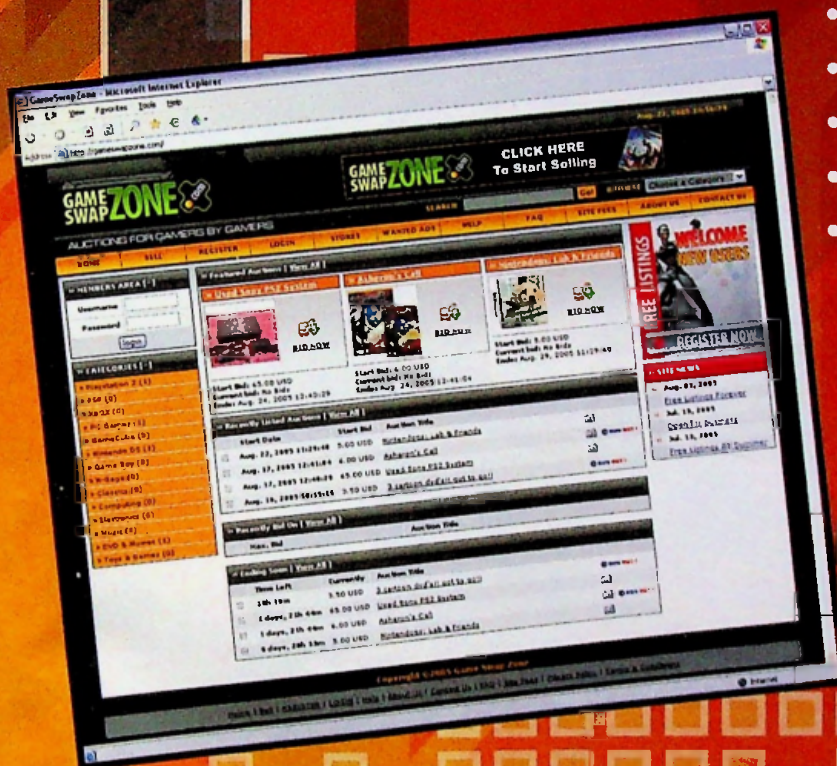
No Internet? Well, barring suicide: *Heroes III* has been the most traveled game in my laptop case, and I've nearly worn a hole in the CD (another hole, that is). Still an addictive attention grabber, it's consistently a never-say-die-just-one-more-turn experience, and offers some of the richest TBS ever. *Civ III*? Uh, ditto. *Bookworm*, not really a lightweight at all when it comes to challenge, is another must. It just has so many... words, and words never get old. Yum. I never did everything there was to do in the amazingly immersive *Morrowind*, but if I did finish it, there's that great scenario editor. No one to share with, though, so I guess I'd make some mods-in-a-bottle, toss them into the ocean, and hope. Finally, the frilly *RollerCoaster Tycoon* definitely comes along as well. I'd build a really, really big park... with a desert island theme! Maybe not. —Cindy Yans

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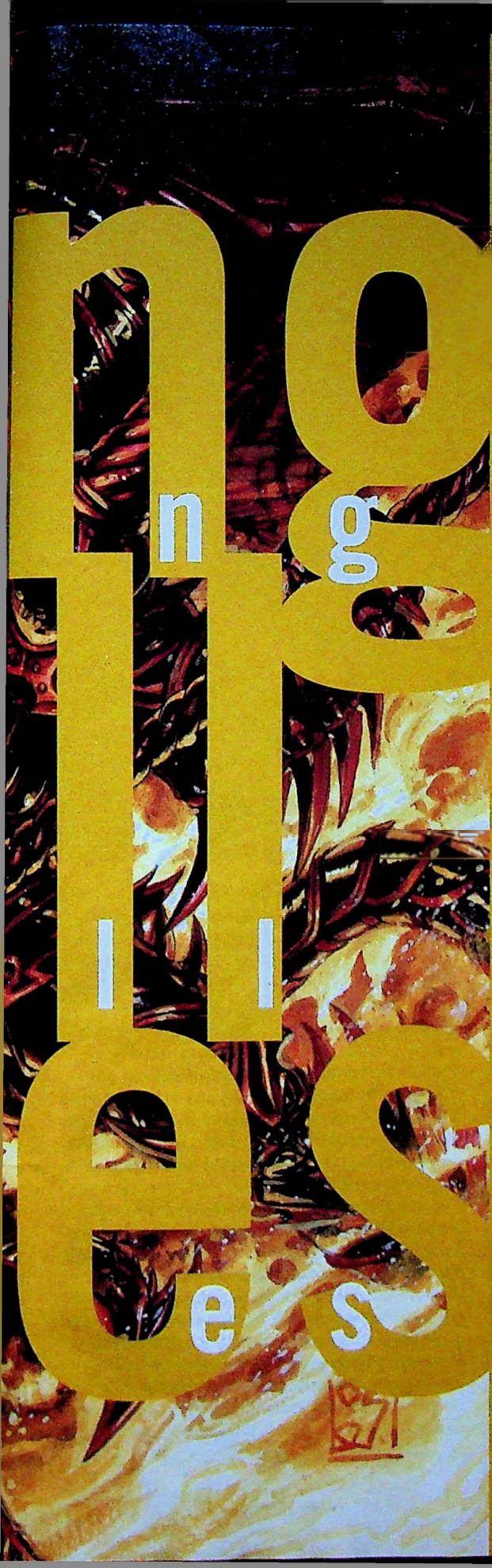
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Calli

ahero



One of the all-time classics comes back to life in the epic Heroes of Might and Magic V

BY BRETT TODD

Unicorns have an uncanny power over little girls. Thanks to Disney's cult-like marketing power and god knows how many cheesy fantasy novel covers, those pony faces with the long lashes and saucer-sized eyes have launched the bedroom redecorations of a thousand pre-teen girls.

Despite this sizable potential audience, Ubisoft associate producer Erwan Le Breton is adamant that these cutesy creatures are not the sort of unicorns that will be found in *Heroes of Might and Magic V*. Your kid sister won't be the only person in line when one of strategy gaming's legendary franchises resumes in early 2006 (look for it on store shelves in February) after a four-year hiatus.

"When we first started planning the game, we got some concept artwork that included some unicorns that didn't fit with the direction we wanted to take the *Heroes* series at all," explains Le Breton with a laugh, as he attacks a treat with a unicorn that you wouldn't want to run into in a night-time alley. "We were looking for dark, epic fantasy where people die, and we'd gotten back art that looked like the sort of thing that would come with a little girl's comb."

So *Heroes* aficionados don't have to worry about the new game looking like *The Last Unicorn*. Actually, judging by the preview build just going into beta-testing that Le Breton showed off at Ubisoft's factory-like North American headquarters in Montreal, fans of this venerable turn-based fantasy series don't have anything to worry about at all. Even in its pre-release state, the game looks and plays like a letter-perfect recreation of the beloved *Heroes III*, with the only major changes being gorgeous 3D graphics and an enhanced storyline with better-balanced factions.

First and foremost, there don't seem to be any big surprises. You could go from *Heroes III* to *Heroes V* without even a glance at the manual. All that's missing is the New World Computing name on the label, as the game is currently being developed for the publisher by Russian developer Nival Interactive. The new game is a reincarnation of the old, with the same basic turn-based mechanics governing how you explore a fairly traditional fantasy world furnished with huge citadels, random monsters, and lots of loot. Battles are still played out on chessboard-like screens. Six factions, each with units representing specific fantasy archetypes, continue to fight among themselves for supremacy. The Haven, Sylvan, Academy, Necropolis, Inferno, and Dungeon civilizations all return, with familiar warriors, wizards, elves, undead, and demons filling out their ranks.

We sat down and got right into a scenario pitting a renegade Demon Lord with the Inferno faction against Sylvan Elves, Pixies, and Unicorns. With no prior guidance other than the brief, Le Breton-guided tour of the main features, which served as a refresher, we were soon besieging cities, killing monsters for treasure hordes, and laying claim to resource-producing buildings like sawmills and gold mines.



[top] Do fear the reaper. That vampire may be able to raise his great big sword above his head to salute enemies before battle, but then he's too tired to use it during the fight. [insert] A Sylvan hero gets ready to fight, with his manly unicorn by his side. [opposite page] Maps are more detailed than ever, with lots of hidden goodies sprinkled between the trees.

Say Hello to Metrosexual Bloodsuckers Fans will, of course, be treated to a few changes. Ubisoft acquired the *Might and Magic* brand from bankrupt publisher 3DO with a plan to take the series back to its roots, so *Heroes V* is being designed as the foundation of the new franchise. Also, a great deal of input is being provided by Moscow-based developer Nival Interactive, chosen to replace defunct New World Computing (which vanished along with parent 3DO in 2003) in large part due to its outstanding work in turn-based fantasy games like the *Etherlords* series and *Silent Storm*.

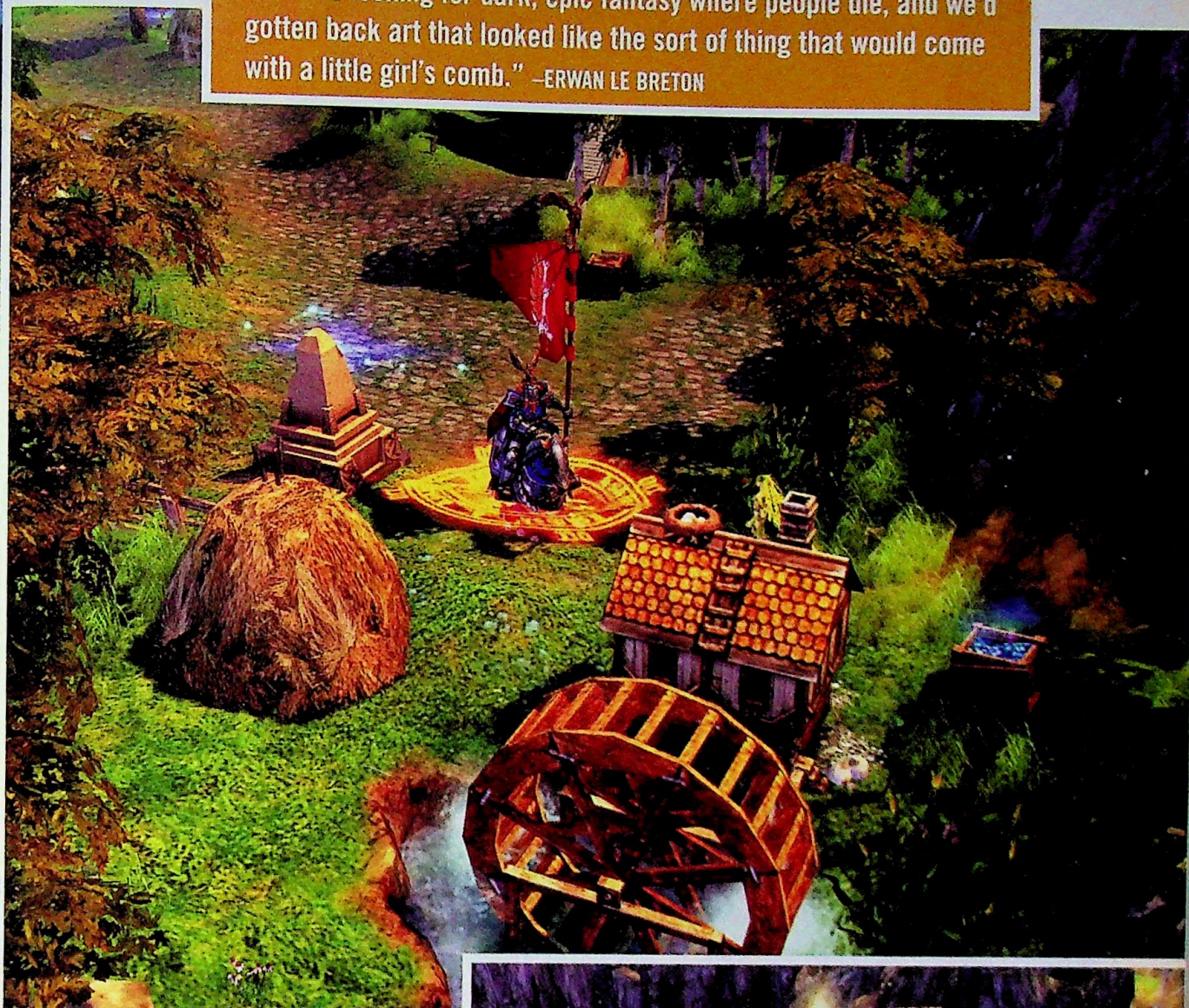
Ubisoft has also recruited pen-and-paper role-playing game designer Richard Danksy to scribe a bible for

the *Might and Magic* universe, and hired fantasy and sci-fi author Jeff Spock to write a script for *Heroes V*. The result is Ashan, a new world that contains a lot of familiar faces, and an epic story about an overwhelming demon invasion that forces previously warring factions to unite.

"We're staying very similar to previous *Heroes* games in terms of gameplay, and a lot of little details regarding factions and units go back to *Heroes III*," explains Le Breton. "But we're doing an integrated, 30-mission solo campaign where you play all the factions for the first time, and getting into a more involved, epic plot that carries over 60 to 80 hours of gameplay. We're even revamping the factions, adding more background and a sense of purpose for each."

Most of this remodeling is being done to the Dungeon faction. According to Le Breton, this grouping was previously just a hodgepodge of creatures blatantly ripped off from the original *Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual*. Now the faction is being led by Dark Elves, who are making their first appearance in a *Heroes* game (although they were in a number of *Might and Magic* role-playing games). Units include Dark Elf classes such as Assassins and Furies, along with old Dungeon holdovers like the Minotaur (now slave to the Dark Elves), Hydra, and Black Dragon.

"We were looking for dark, epic fantasy where people die, and we'd gotten back art that looked like the sort of thing that would come with a little girl's comb." —ERWAN LE BRETON



Other factions are being moved over from the earlier games almost intact. Le Breton promises that all fan-favorite units are returning. All factions are receiving additions to their ranks, though. Some of the notable new arrivals include the Academy's Rakshasa, an Indian demon with four arms and the head of a tiger, and the Necromancers' Undead Wraith.

Still, most alterations consist of new artwork, adjusted stats, and overhauled attack and defense options. The new Vampire, for instance, will be characterized along the lines of Anne Rice's flamboyant, metrosexual blood-suckers, not the Count Blah! lookalike from previous *Heroes* games. Most changes will apparently be made along these same lines, as Ubisoft wants to rid the franchise of all preexisting influences (yes, including *D&D*) in order to build a fresh mythos totally contained within the new *Might and Magic* universe.





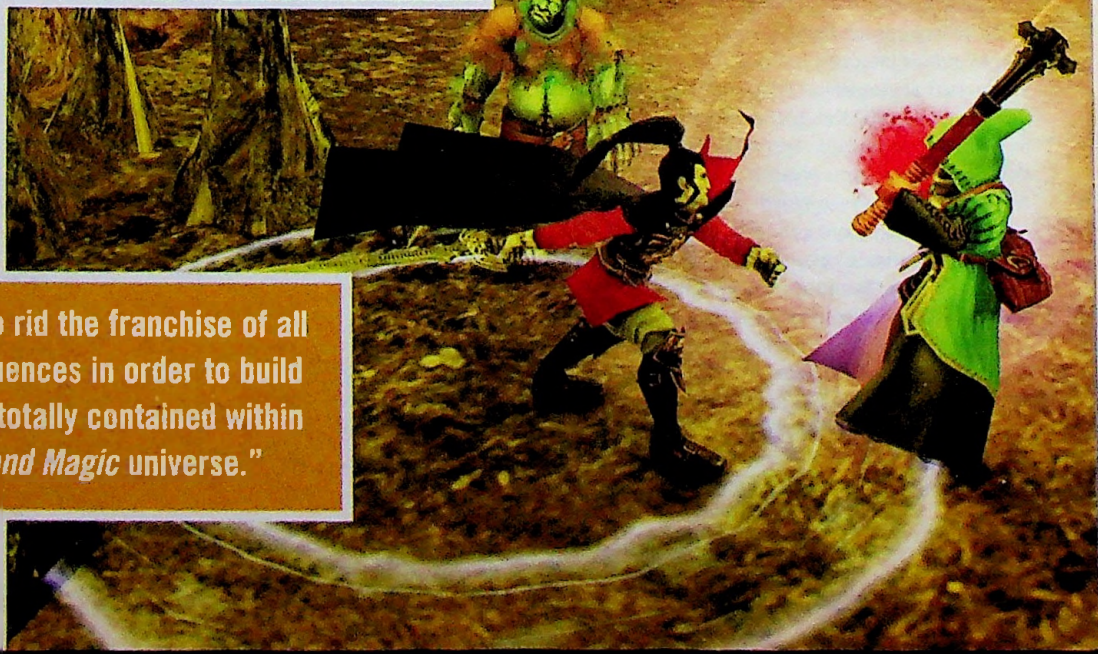
No Nasty Surprises The game mechanics also seem to toe the line for the most part. The lone exception is the Dynamic Battle System (DBS), a new way to play that takes this turn-based series as close as it has ever come to a real-time mode. But this new feature won't turn games into *Command & Conquer*-style click-fests. DBS just attaches a timer to standard turns to keep the action rolling in multiplayer matches. The option will be available for solo games and campaign play as well, although Le Breton can't imagine too many players using it in this fashion, because it will get in the way of the storyline.



Of course, you can always skip this newfangled gizmo and play in traditional turn-based fashion. While the single-player campaign looks more intricately plotted than *Heroes* games of the past, and DBS is certainly a step in a new direction, Le Breton assures long-time fans that there will be no "nasty surprises." One of the most important goals in the design of the new game was to stay true to the original series designed by New World Computing. To this end, Nival has constantly sought the advice of the hardcore fanbase, getting its opinion on everything from which old units should be kept in the new design to the role of the hero in combat.



The combat has received an obvious make-over. The new Dynamic Battle System takes this turn-based series as close as it has ever come to a real-time mode.



"Ubisoft wants to rid the franchise of all preexisting influences in order to build a fresh mythos totally contained within the new *Might and Magic* universe."

Through a Mirror, Darkly

Dark Messiah of Might and Magic goes down a grittier path

Morally ambiguous fantasy epics might be few and far between in a genre accustomed to stereotypes like the stainless white knight, but Ubisoft is hoping to break new ground with *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*. It's being developed by *Arx Fatalis* creator Arkane Studios as a gritty take on traditional swords and sorcery, recognizing that real battles generally don't feature white versus black hats.

"Fantasy gaming has evolved over time and has grown to recognize the ambiguity inherent in any conflict," says Stéphane Decroix, executive producer for the *Might and Magic* franchise. "With *Dark Messiah*, we have kept that ambiguity in mind as we tell the story. The result is a dramatic and exciting adventure with shades of gray that challenges the player and gives greater meaning to his experience."

Actually, *Dark Messiah* should be challenging to players in a lot of respects. Unlike past *Might and Magic* games, it will be a first-person action game. And it will look and feel a fair bit like a contemporary shooter, complete with beautifully rendered visuals courtesy of the Source engine that Valve used to make *Half-Life 2* and a huge variety of monsters to slay (most of which will also be found in a quite different setting in *Heroes V*).

The story, however, is pure fantasy. You play Sareth, a young apprentice sent on a quest to recover a magical artifact that means the difference between a happy world filled with elves and pixies and an evil one crammed with lava-loving demons. As usual in these sorts of things, you have to find the relic before the bad guys do. Fail in your

quest and the Dark Messiah (who will be familiar from a prophecy revealed at the end of *Heroes V*) will use it to open a gate to the demonic realm, allowing nasty guys with horns and hooves to turn the world of Ashan into, um, ash.

That said, don't expect a first-person RPG. "*Dark Messiah* is all about action," says Decroix, also promising that there will be no roleplaying statistics. While there will be "character evolution," it will be solely to "enrich the possibilities of action for the player," and will focus on such things as choosing new spells and different moves and attacks.

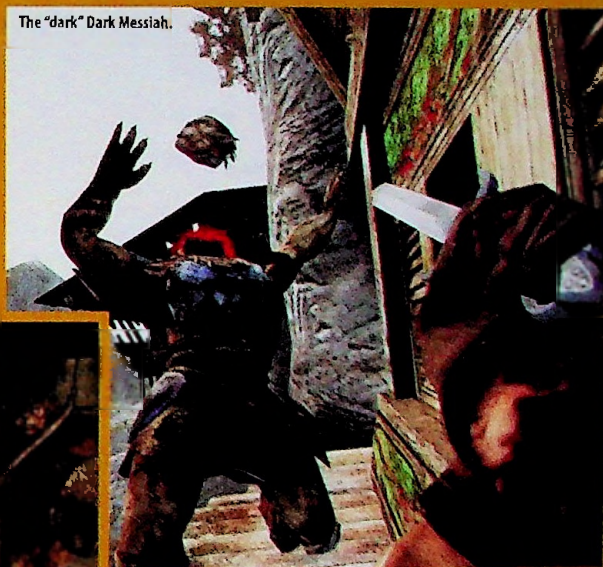
There will be no defined classes, either, so players

won't be stuck in a specific role like a warrior, mage, or thief. On the contrary, players will be free to play like any or all of the above throughout the entire game. Chosen skills will allow for open-ended playing styles, so gamers can try to

save Ashan in whatever way they prefer. It'll be up to you whether you wade into melee combat with a sword or stand back and launch fireball spells.

This new age in *Might and Magic* is set to begin in the summer of 2006.

The "dark" Dark Messiah.





M&M Flood

Expect more Might and/or Magic down the road

The return of the *Might and Magic* series will not be a one-shot deal. Executive producer Stéphane Decroix says that Ubisoft has big plans for the franchise, which he calls a "premier fantasy gaming brand," one which has a great reputation for being emblazoned on "highly rated and fun to play games."

So expect something of a *Might and Magic* flood over the

next few years. *Heroes of Might and Magic V* is just the tip of the Elf, the cornerstone of a new series that blends old, familiar aspects of the original New World Computing-developed games with a new and more developed fantasy world called Ashan.

"In previous *Might and Magic* games, there was a lot of creativity and imagination but the world itself changed from game



to game," says Decroix. "Starting with *Heroes V*, the world will be presented as more consistent and unified. All future *Might and Magic* games will take place in this world. Ubisoft will first release a strategy game in *Heroes V*, then a first-person action game next summer in *Dark Messiah*. Additional types of games are also in development."

Decroix is unwilling to disclose what those "additional games" will be, but he does offer

some juicy story tidbits. Ubisoft has created a "bible," one that's similar to those produced for television series. It's something of an Ashan encyclopedia, with descriptions of all the creatures to be found there, the various factions fighting for power, leading characters, and even the topography of the world.

An entire epic has been planned for this realm, one that will strive to be darker and more sophisticated than traditional

That latter point actually leads to what's arguably the biggest change in gameplay. Unlike in *Heroes IV*, where heroes were incorporated into parties and fought alongside their recruits, *Heroes V* is going back to earlier games in the series and sidelining them. This was apparently one of the biggest fan gripes that Nival received; many said that heroes both unbalanced battles and altered the party dynamic, since powerful heroes could slaughter enemy parties all by their lonesome.

Now, heroes will still be involved in battles, but as party commanders who stand in the back row lending certain special abilities and spells to the fight.

Other tweaks are more subtle. Heroes now leave a trail behind them for a turn or so, befitting their lordly stature. In the demo build, the cloven hooves of the Demon Lord Agrael left brimstone and ash in his wake, which enemies could track. Cities are now full 3D areas that have a real presence when compared with the previous games' static 2D screens. Units can be ordered from one catch-all screen accessed by the main city

Coming at you in 3D!
Towns have come a long way from the simple 2D screens of past games in the series.





"noble knight saves the world" fantasy. Judging by the still light-hearted artwork and what we've seen of the *Heroes V* gameplay, Ubisoft isn't quite going into George R.R. Martin's "everybody dies" territory in the *Song of Ice and Fire* novels. But not all heroes will emerge from this saga hale and hearty. Characters will die. Bad things will happen.

All of these dramatic events will play out in succession, too. Each

new game in the *Might and Magic* series will pick up where its predecessor left off, regardless of genre. *Dark Messiah*, for example, will begin 20 years after the conclusion of the apocalyptic events in *Heroes V*. Earlier events will be referenced, and some of the leading characters in the first game will show up in the second. While the stories will be self-contained, so that action fans don't have to suffer through a strategy game and



Old-school *Might and Magic* and *Heroes*

vice versa, those who log hours with both titles will get more out of the overall experience.

And there will be a pay-off down the road for *Might and Magic* addicts. An ending for the entire series has already been written, so expect to cap the saga started in *Heroes V* with a fitting finale around five years from now. As the original *New World Computing* games were set in rotating, clichéd fantasy

worlds more twaddle than Tolkien, Decroix thinks that long-time fans will appreciate these changes.

"We want to give the player a truly immersive experience in the *Might and Magic* fantasy universe. We see this as a new beginning that will keep the depth of gameplay and quality that was established in the past, while bringing the brand to new heights of immersion not before seen."

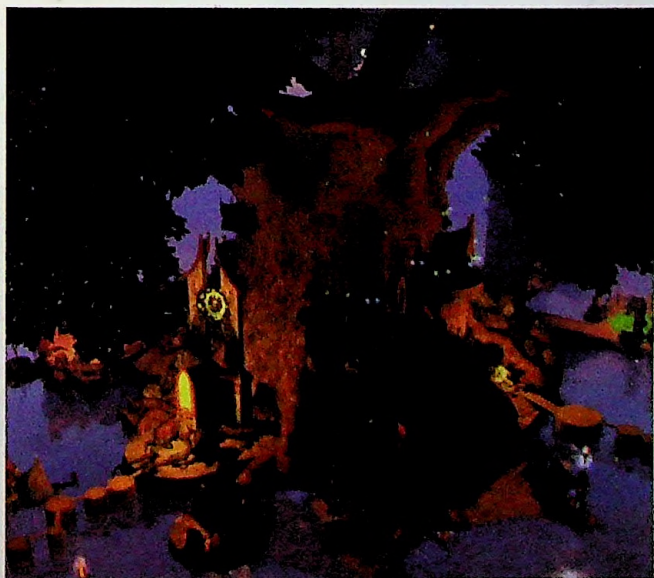
menu, or by clicking on buildings individually. Text has been cut back, so the story isn't constantly interrupted by a blitz of information and stats. The plot is also kept moving along by numerous short cutscenes rendered with the game engine.

Multiplayer is receiving a more thorough overhaul... which isn't all that surprising when you consider that previous *Heroes* releases featured nothing but same-machine hotseat play. Le Breton is most excited about Ghost, a mode that sort of blends the ATB system with

standard turns. Here, though, players move at the same time and can outfox their opponents if they're quick. The other big multiplayer mode of play is Duel, which allows heroes to take each other on in arenas.

New World, Same Old Heroes Along with the brand new world introduced in *Heroes V* comes a fresh take on the visuals. Olivier Ledroit, who emerged as one of the top artists in French comics in the 1990s, has signed on as the principal illustrator for the *Might and Magic* franchise. He's given the units and maps a complete overhaul that includes a bit of that "great big sword" stuff that was emblematic of the *Final Fantasy* series five or six years ago.

In-game artwork appears anything but derivative, though. The build demon-





What's a nice hero doing in a depressing place like this? [insert] A Metropolis hero gets ready to put a spell on you.

strated by Le Breton clearly shows that Nival and Ubisoft are building on the foundation of their predecessors. Maps look a lot like updates of those we explored, looted, and conquered in *Heroes III*. Le Breton says that a lot of effort was made to retain the "colorful, comic-book aspects" of the original games. This was certainly

apparent in the maps he demonstrated, principally in the forest settings that boasted trees greener than golf courses and lakes that shimmered like diamonds.

Maps in the preview build were also packed with the sort of detail that first made *Heroes* such a smash. Goodies like piles of sulphur, Titan-guarded treasure chests, and enemy cities could be found in every nook and cranny. Exploration was even enhanced with the inclusion of partially hidden treasure that couldn't be seen unless you took advantage of the new 3D engine and rotated the default camera angle. Such explorations were also made easier by the depiction of treas-

ure items above chests. For example, you can skip a battle if the item is useless, or if you've already acquired this treasure.

Forgoing battles most likely won't be something you'll make a habit of, though, multiple greaves or not. Along with the incentive provided by experience points and gold, Nival is adding some comely fight graphics. Although the battle chessboard remains the same, with the same old movement squares, key attacks and spells are being emphasized with zoomed-in signature scenes.

Battles in the demo, for example, were highlighted with close-ups that tracked the arrows of elven archers from bow to enemy chest, caught pixies blowing deadly dust in the face of green dragons, and depicted the martial-arts moves of certain types of elves in melee combat. Le Breton promised that it will be possible to turn these

sequences off, though, since even the sight of elves engaged in kung-fu fighting (they're fast as lightning) gets old after a half dozen or so repeats.

Audio effects also promise to be a blend of old and new. Most of them were still being recorded, but Le Breton did say that Ubisoft was using proper actors for the main roles, and making a concerted effort to avoid the generic "Yes, my liege!" order acknowledgements that plague so many other strategy games. Also, he confirmed that veteran *Might and Magic* series composer Rob King was creating new theme music. Le Breton has heard a number of these new tunes and describes them as "very atmospheric, but in the tradition of the earlier games."

A Legend Returns More manly unicorns, a more detailed plot, beautiful 3D visuals, new multiplayer modes of play—what more could a *Heroes* fan want? At this point in the game's development, it appears as if *Heroes V* will give hardcore fans exactly what they want while still acknowledging that the earlier games, as beloved as they are, could be improved on.

Old may be meeting new here, but this looks like anything but a formulaic sequel turned out just to cash in on the legacy of a legendary series. ■



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Strogg und Drang

For both better and worse,
Quake IV parties like it's still 1999.

BY KELLY WAND

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Ye Olde-Schoole FPS **Developer** Raven Software **Publisher** Activision **ESRB** Mature
Requirements 2GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

In a way, it's ironic that *Quake IV* bears Raven's stamp, because no other game to date so ideally sums up the strengths and weaknesses of the Id Way. A stylistically cautious remix of the last two installments in the series, *Quake IV* often feels stuck in a time warp before *Battlefield*, *Unreal*, and *Call of Duty*. But sometimes visuals and energy

levels can go a long way.

Lord knows it needs all the help it can get. Leaking the only plot twist offered by its single-player campaign months in advance is almost as bad as including only nine multiplayer maps. (The twist is also a red herring that has little bearing on story or gameplay.) Still, when it's firing on all cylinders, and especially when stacked against the monotonous slog of interchangeable pitch-black lab corridors and magnificently high-resolution PDA screens that predominated *DOOM III*, *Quake IV* is

wonderfully loud, dumb, addictively enraging fun, as bracing and pungent as a shot of Chivas right up the nasal passages. It seeks to entertain rather than instruct, and damned if it doesn't.

Much of the focus has been devoted to the quaintly straightforward single-player, in which you play taciturn space marine Matthew Kane, the first id character ever to have a name (which shows you how serious they are about the craft of storytelling this time around). All the cryptic references to Kane's badass exploits your squadmates



[opposite page left] "This is probably a waste of last words but just out of curiosity, what creatures were you adapted from before us?" [above] Stealth missions pwn. [left] Hasta lasagna, don't get any on ya.

drop in tones of hushed awe might make more narrative sense if you were playing the same character who'd destroyed the Makron at the end of *Quake II*, but perhaps the long-term plan is to have us care equally about thirty-seven different Marines by *Quake XXVIII*.

The upside to this disinterest is that there's hardly any time-wasting setup. Everything but action has been cheerily chucked over the side. After some preliminary imagery brazenly snaked from *Starship Troopers* (the movie, not the boardgame),

your character crash-lands, picks up a machinegun, and you're immediately thrown right into battle trenches engulfed by carnage, flying body parts, energy cannons, and subwoofer temblors. A lot of the ensuing level design tends toward the boxy and the linear, but you're usually too busy killing something and enjoying the bloodsoaked scenery to notice just how much.

It helps a lot that most of *DOOM III*'s exasperating touches are gone, or at least in remission. There's still a fair share of déjà vu-inducing blood-streaked hallways, but

they're glossier, better lit, and come in more than one color. Gone are the PDA and three-digit keycodes buried in memo after tedious memo, not to mention monster closets triggered by ammo lying in the middle of the room expressly to taunt you. By and large, *Quake IV* plays fair.

Instead of a claustrophobic horror vibe, you get gung-ho machismo delivered via Saturday morning kidvid dialogue by your buddies and commanders with all the urgency of Paris Hilton eating a light bulb, though having seasoned jarheads say "freaking" this much in an M-rated game seems more far-fetched than any alien invasion. All your squadmates are young, male, and surprisingly free of battle wounds, especially considering what eager and durable (though not quite invincible) meat shields they make. Not that they don't carry their weight: medics restore your health while others periodically boost your weapons with upgrades like enhanced ammo capacity, lower cooldown rates, or tracking sensors. But their AI's not quite up to *Call of Duty*'s: sometimes they surge

ahead prematurely or block your way when it's time for you to take point. As comrades-in-arms go, they're useful but inorganic, and you feel nothing when one dies except irritation when it's your last medic.

Your arsenal includes every reliable mainstay from earlier *Quakes*, although all but the shotgun feel subtly nerfed. Both the nail- and railguns have a noticeable charge-

yourself, but unfortunately not all the way. The indoctrination sequence is hilarious and brilliant, but it's promptly, tragically followed up by a last-second *deus ex machina* rescue that totally undercuts the tension and winds up meaning nothing. Being able to decipher Strogg writing (but how, if they didn't tamper with your brain yet?) and use their healing facilities seems like a thin fol-

low-through compared to prospects like becoming a full-blown Strogg and going on to annihilate the human race with Strogg weapons and

vehicles never before seen. Or at least being superstrong. How excited are you supposed to get over slightly improved jumping?

Maybe it's just as well, since the Strogg are so dreadfully milquetoast as villains. Here you are at the heart of a civilization whose only cultural undertaking is lurking behind doors waiting to shoot Marines or making gigantic assembly-line grinders to grind them up in. The aliens in *Half-Life* were at least inscrutable; as FPS targets, the Strogg are a species in desperate need of at least one defining characteristic beyond "quasi-metallic."

Again, though, it's a testimonial to Raven how infrequently any of this crosses your mind while you're caught up in the midst of *Quake's* dazzling, deafening displays of pyrotechnics. And strangely, even as the ac-

tion hurtles along with the goofy speed of a silent movie, there's something endearing, almost grandmotherly, about its insistence on hoary tropes like jump-pads and wrestling announcers. Where *DOOM III* was a scratchy, hand-knitted turtleneck, *Quake IV's* the cookies.

Making up in visual and sonic intensity what it's missing in innovation (and, for now, multiplayer content), *Quake IV* may not make you think, but it'll make you laugh—it has, hands down, the best scripted sequence involving a parade-float-sized fetus of the millennium. And once updates of cherished mods like *Jailbreak*, *Rocket Arena*, and *Loki's Minions* make their way online, it won't be such a guilty pleasure. ■

"Quake IV is as bracing and pungent as a shot of Chivas right up the nasal passages."

up delay that makes multiplayer feel more rocket-centric, while the BFG, rechristened the "Dark Matter Gun" presumably to conform more realistically with recent discoveries in nucleosynthesis, takes so long to fire and requires so much accuracy, you're probably better off with the machine-gun.

But by far *Quake IV's* cruelest tease is its superficial inclusion of vehicles. The gliding hovertank and a plodding, heavily armored 'mech-walker (both possible nods to iconic Activision titles) handle far too smoothly to be wheeled out merely for the shooting-gallery filler they wind up as. They're the stars of perfunctory scenarios that have you fighting usually alone, shooting down a conveniently lined-up row of laser turrets or a solitary spider boss. There's just no sense of scope or tactical use of terrain, the very stuff that makes vehicular combat worth representing. And it's especially odd that not even one multiplayer map with the very tanks and walkers trumpeted on the box art managed to make the cut. Why put them in at all if you're not going to show them off?

Except for a memorably obese cherub thirty stories high you encounter about halfway in (in a sequence that pleasantly evokes the finale of the first *Quake*), the Strogg lack the menacing oomph of *DOOM III's* demons on first appearance. Maybe it's their overt similarities to the Borg, which are part of a pantheon no one associates with goosebumps. Maybe it's that most of them look alike from a distance: dark, gleaming carapaces obscured by aureoles of gunfire. You can't seem to get a good look at the character design when they're shooting at you, and you can't get a good look at their bodies afterward because they dissolve into green swirlies too fast.

Then of course you become a Strogg

Serious Sam II

Oh serious one, why have you gone so wrong in so many ways?

★ ★ ½

Genre Stupid Simulator Developer Croteam

Publisher 2K Games ESRB Mature

Requirements 1.5GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

There was a moment at the beginning of *Serious Sam* when it crossed over from being an oddly named obscurity from a Croatian developer into something truly inspired. You're standing in a flat,



The problems with Sam have nothing to do with the bad guys; there's a lot of them, and they're all weird.

empty courtyard and hear a faint sound in the distance. It gets louder. It's a scream. Louder. Still louder. And then it hits you, literally; You're under attack. From headless guys carrying bombs. Who are apparently yelling, despite their obvious lack of heads. It made no sense but it didn't have to.

That was the first of many surprises *Serious Sam* had in store for players. But in the sequel, the cleverly named *Serious Sam II*, there's now a cutscene preceding the surprise that shows you exactly what's in store for you down the road. It's as if Croteam forgot that the best way to keep players consistently off-kilter is to withhold information from them.

With fewer surprises, all that you're left with is an over-the-top, candy-colored, visually sumptuous shooting gallery. The weapons are still huge, though the splash damage from grenades is surprisingly subdued, and bodies still explode in bloody chunks. You still flip figurative triggers that send wave after wave of absurd enemies in your direction.

But there's something slightly off about almost everything. Where the first violated the rules at every turn, *Serious Sam II* follows them down to the last T. There are the requisite vehicles, stationary turrets, and es-

cort missions—all it needed was a stealth mission to pass "3D Shooter 101." The humor is less goofy and more moronic—it's seemingly targeted at our inner third-grader that finds farts hysterically funny. It has an elaborate storyline, with tons of rendered cut scenes, as if anyone plays this game for its plot. And some scenes are timed in such a way that makes little sense, and pull you out of levels before you're ready to leave. One, preceding your entrance into the "Royal Sewers," is triggered by your proximity to the entrance, not actually entering.

Where the first game reveled in enormous battles in giant, flat areas, *Serious Sam II* has too many small and restrictive ones. At times, you wonder if it's really a game or just an extended ad for the Serious Engine. "Look, we can do more standard layouts." Later levels feature tiny areas for movement with airborne attackers coming from all directions. With no real way to dodge any of the attacks, it's pretty much time to throw up your hands in frustration and give up.



TOP SELLERS



- 1 **The Sims 2: Nightlife**
Electronic Arts ★★★
A Sims expansion tops the list, a WarCraft game is near the top, RollerCoaster Tycoon is up there... is this 2005 or 2000?
- 2 **World of WarCraft**
Vivendi Universal ★★★★★
- 3 **RollerCoaster Tycoon 3**
Atari ★★★★★
- 4 **Battlefield 2**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 5 **Guild Wars**
NCSoft ★★★★★
- 6 **Dungeon Siege II**
Microsoft ★★★★★
- 7 **The Sims Deluxe**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 8 **The Sims 2**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 9 **EverQuest: Depths of Darkhollow**
Sony Online Not Rated
- 10 **Warhammer 40K: Dawn of Winter**
THQ Not Rated
- 11 **EverQuest II: Desert of Flames**
Sony Online Not Rated
- 12 **The Sims 2 University**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 13 **Mall of America Tycoon**
Activision Not Rated
- 14 **Fable: The Lost Chapters**
Microsoft ★★★★★
- 15 **Half-Life 2**
Vivendi Universal ★★★★★
- 16 **Madden NFL 06**
EA Sports ★★★★★
- 17 **Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection**
Microsoft Not Rated
- 18 **Seaworld Tycoon II**
Activision Not Rated
- 19 **SimCity 4 Deluxe**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 20 **WarCraft III Battle Chest**
Blizzard ★★★★★

Source: NPD Group/NPD Funworld. The September list is based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market.

And when you have uninteresting AI that relies on quantity over quality, funneling everything into a tiny area makes it either too hard or too easy. If you're going to have levels with more complex environments, you better have an AI that's able to navigate it without getting stuck. It's too easy to find some random corner that's inaccessible to creatures; they end up running around in circles playing, "Where's Sam," while you snipe them one by one. (It's made even more obvious by the game's invisible borders.)

The mediocre single-player is somewhat redeemed by the fact that you can play the entire game with up to 16 people co-op. With even a handful of people, it becomes a gloriously mad dash of death. The difficulty ratchets up considerably, though finding a lag-free game is an even bigger challenge.

There are times in either the single- or multiplayer when the stupid reaches nearly operatic levels. Some of the levels, Greendale in particular, are terrific. The enemies are inspired. You have Kung Fu Zombies, Exploding Clowns, Zombie Stockbrokers, Orc Football Players, and some of the more popular of Mental's minions (Kleers, etc.). Why does a giant mechanized raptor have a cigar in its mouth? Why wouldn't it? Some parts reach stupid nirvana, but most never flip from being so stupid they're cool. Instead, they just flip back to stupid.

Which is somewhat depressing, because the original was just that good. It's easy to forget that there was nothing like *Serious Sam* when it appeared. Today, *Serious Sam II* has to contend not only with its predecessor but the superior *Painkiller*. That game ran with the ball, and apparently, People Can Fly took it home and locked it in a box. It's not easy to create a balls-out, over-the-top modern shooter, and even Croteam stumbles here. Oh Sam, why are you merely zigging when you should be zigging, zagging, jumping, and launching enormous exploding projectiles at your enemies? —Steve Bauman

Get this close and you're either playing with God mode on or you're the second coming of Audie Murphy.



Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood

A sequel? Already?

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Another WWII Shooter **Developer** Gearbox Software **Publisher** Ubi Soft **ESRB** Mature **Requirements** 2.5GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

Talk about crowding up the new releases shelf. Where most game developers wait a year before releasing an expansion pack, let alone a sequel, Gearbox Software and Ubi Soft have thrown caution aside with *Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood*. This full-blown follow-up comes hot on the combat-booted heels of *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30*, the shooter ode to *Saving Private Ryan* that hit stores less than a year ago.

That constricted timeframe means good news and bad news. Fans get a retread that's more of a standalone expansion than a real sequel, but there isn't anything here to change your mind if you didn't care for the original. Sgt. Joe "Red" Hartsock replaces

Sgt. Matt Baker as the lead, but the WWII action still takes place around D-Day, German troops have to be suppressed with the same old tactical maneuvering, and the story remains heavy on Spielbergian melodrama.

A few refinements alter the character of gameplay, though. Gearbox apparently spent the months between the release of *Road to Hill 30* and *Earned in Blood* working on AI. This mainly results in more realistic krauts. When Fritz, Hans, and pals spot you moving into a flanking position now, they retreat, try to flank you in turn, or goon you head-on, presumably while humming "Deutschland Uber Alles."

This ensures more realistic action and insanely difficult levels, and a slightly less enjoyable game. It's just not a lot of fun repeating flanking maneuvers to take out every squad of Germans you encounter, especially when you're often rushed into action by enemy mortars that zero in on hiding spots in under a minute. Frustration can be so high that you order your teams to make suicidal assaults (hey, they'll be resurrected at the end of the level anyways) so you can finish off pesky goose-steppers.

More intelligent opposition also empha-

sizes puzzle-like level design in all 11 missions. Zoom out to the situational awareness view and you can see not only where you need to move, but also where Hitler's finest will move in response. This makes each level a tad predictable, and even a bit tedious, because you always know what you need to do even if you can't accomplish it right away. More mid-mission surprises would be welcome.

Also, it would've been nice if Gearbox had saved some brain cells for your own squad. Just like in the first game, your buddies need to be micromanaged. Fail to lead them by the nose and they'll pull spectacularly stupid moves like hitting a machine-gun nest with suppressing fire from the clear because there isn't quite enough room to get behind a haystack.

But for the most part, everything is where Gearbox left it. Mission intensity is unparalleled. No other tactical shooter comes as close as the *Brothers in Arms* series to depicting the brutality of close-quarters combat during wartime. While there is some repetition—missions are modeled on actual battles fought by 101st Airborne commandos in the aftermath of D-Day, so there is a lot of farmhouse clearing and fighting along those

famous French hedgerows—the feeling of being in mortal danger never gets old. Few shooters keep you so focused.

Multiplayer also remains a great change of pace. With the exception of the spectacularly hard (five missions, one life, no checkpoints) Tour of Duty mode, it's a complete rehashing of *Road to Hill 30*. But this objective-oriented, cooperative skirmishing still feels fresh compared to the "deathmatch, deathmatch, and, oh, more deathmatch" competition. Skirmishes can also be played solo, so you can get a feel for maps before buddying up.

Perhaps the only serious complaint is the

continuing absence of save-on-demand. Being able to save every time you cleared a trench would be a cheat and would undoubtedly drop the intensity. But it's still no fun getting stuck at save checkpoints and repeating lengthy sections of the game (which happens often in a game as hard as this one).

Oh, and let's not forget StarForce copy protection. Yes, piracy is bad, anyone who downloads a game should be sent to Guantanamo Bay without dinner, etc. Yet somebody has to speed up this monstrosity. It takes over two minutes to go through the disc check, a ridiculously long inconvenience for legal purchasers of the game.

Aside from niggling irritations, *Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood* marches behind its predecessor as one of the most polished tactical shooters ever released. While some of the bloom is now off the carbine, anyone who appreciates contemplation before killing will enjoy their European vacation with Joe Hartsock and friends. —Brett Todd

Diplomacy

A grievous fault

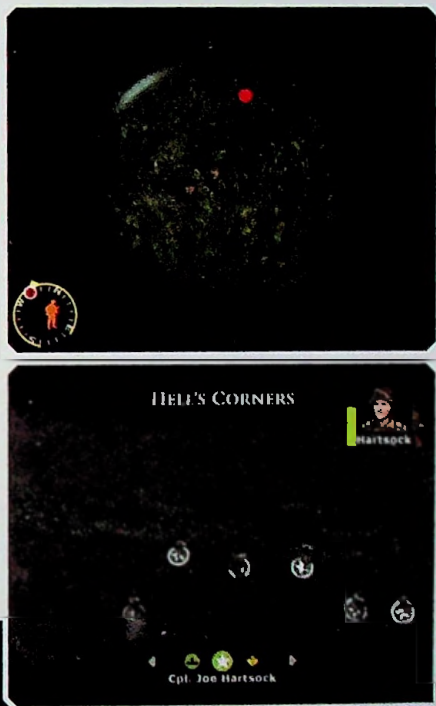


Genre Friendly/not-so-friendly Strategy
Developer/Publisher Paradox ESRB Everyone
Requirements 800MHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Diplomacy is the anti-Risk. Like its Parker Brothers cousin, *Diplomacy* is a conquer-thy-neighbor board game. People band together to balance a dominant power, and you make deals to save your skin. What sets *Diplomacy* apart is that there is no room for luck. Victory depends wholly on convincing your opponents that you're not such a bad guy, and that you have a bridge to sell them. The latest computer version is developer Paradox's most ambitious game yet.

That might sound, well, paradoxical. The Swedish strategy masters are known for their hugely ambitious, even encyclopedic, historical simulation games. *Diplomacy* has very few and very simple rules. But capturing the skulduggery and backstabbing that makes *Diplomacy* an enduring classic proves to be harder than making the ultimate WWII game.

Predictably, the game comes apart in



[upper right] As in real life, the best way to kill your enemies is always through the scope of a sniper rifle. [right] At times, the situational awareness point-of-view exists solely to show you just how screwed you really are. [below] Seeing as you guys have been flanked, it'd be nice if you could stop shooting at me.



[above] It was a time of conflict.
[left] Negotiating with Mr. Muttonchops.

single-player. The attempt to craft a wide array of computer opponents proves to be wasted energy when no single one of the challengers is very sharp. The computer will stab out blindly to grab supply centers (the source of new armies) with little understanding of long-term planning or durable alliances. This instability at High Command means that you can easily grab what you need through deliberate and steady growth. The fact that you can get close to total victory without ever cutting a deal with the AI demonstrates that the game misses the entire point of diplomacy.

Much development time seems to have been expended on making the map a three-dimensional board, which is as unnecessary a use of 3D as has ever been conceived for a computer game. All the AI opponents grimace and growl. These avatar scowls are intended to convey attitudes toward the player and the game, but you would have to play a lot of solo *Diplomacy* to figure out what they all meant. And that is inadvisable.

Single-player reveals the ugly truth that, without human opponents, *Diplomacy* isn't much of a game. Unlike in other board games, the rules here are not the true contest; they only set the stage for the real battle—the give and take, the push-me-pull-you trust game. At its heart, *Diplomacy* is about human interaction, not the movement of armies. Bluffing a computer animation of a guy in a spiky hat just isn't the same.

This leaves the passable multiplayer game. It's nearly impossible to screw up a classic game like *Diplomacy* in multiplayer if

you have a clear interface and a reliable way to pass on your plans. The chat applet is a little awkward but serviceable. The full complement of seven players is recommended for the best experience, unless you want to leave Turkey in the hands of the computer so you can reenact the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire. Playing with fewer than five players is only slightly

better than playing alone. The tutorial is slow but thorough. Newcomers to the game will not be lost for long, so the online game might serve as a decent proving ground for people who want to see how they stack up against real minds.

The question is how much credit to give to a game that is merely a decent port of a well-known title. Unlike a good chess program, this has no library of games or openings. The lack of any significant *Diplomacy* variant list (there are hundreds of different versions) is a major oversight. Though the board game has been played over e-mail for years, there is no PBEM client in the computer version. As elegant as the icon orders interface is, it is no substitute for face-to-face discussions or a well-crafted letter.

It's worth remembering that Paradox's first big hit, *Europa Universalis*, began as a board game, too. Its cardboard predecessor was an unwieldy mess of rules and charts that the computer game adaptation mostly tossed out in favor of a fresh, deep, and fascinating revision. That option simply wasn't available for *Diplomacy*. Tinkering with the core game would be like assigning resource points to squares on a chessboard. *Diplomacy* is one of the greatest board games ever devised. Re-imagining it is out of the question.

This is a pity. With artificial intelligence as unintelligent as it is, the pure thrill of *Diplomacy* is untranslatable to the computer. And there are already well-established online avenues for playing the game. Paradox's *Diplomacy* is not just unimpressive—it's probably unnecessary. —Troy S. Goodfellow

Ultimate Spider-Man

Ultimate? Amazing? Spectacular?
How about "Not Half-Bad,"
true believer?

★ ★ 1/2

Genre Beat-'em-up for Arachnophiles
Developer Treyarch/Beenox Publisher Activision
ESRB Teen Requirements 1.4GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

The comic book *Ultimate Spider-Man* rebooted everybody's favorite web-spinner. It took Peter Parker back to high-school geekdom, morphed hot model Mary-Jane Watson into scrumptious jailbait in hip-huggers and belly shirts, and even ditched J. Jonah Jameson's trademark Hitler moustache.

It also introduced "decompressed" storytelling. This sounds really cool, but it's actually just a fancy way of saying that not much happens. Instead of opting for constant fights between musclebound freaks in long underwear, or even soap-opera storytelling, author Brian Michael Bendis devotes whole issues to zippy dialogue and such gripping events as Peter and Mary-Jane passing notes in class.

Ultimate Spider-Man, the game, doesn't slow things down to these ridiculous ex-

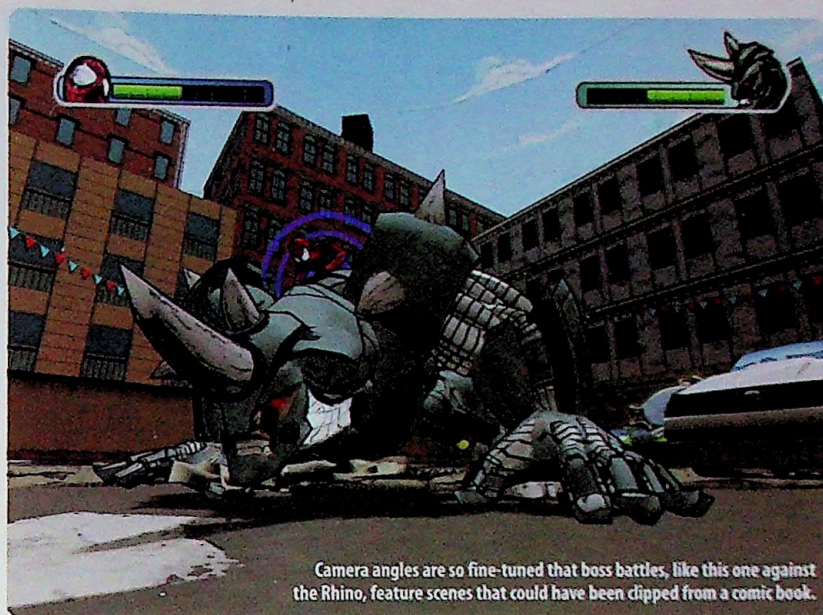


tremes, but it meanders enough to frustrate. While this is still a fairly good game, and it's miles above the butchered port of *Spider-Man 2* that PC gamers were insulted with last year, a lot of potentially nifty stuff is buried under a pile of little annoyances.

Just like *Spider-Man 2* for the consoles, *USM* features a fairly realistically modeled New York City. Spidey can swing through the Manhattan canyons, zip around his suburban home turf of Forest Hills, and catch thieves just like flies. Random crimes also pop up, along with accidents. Simply patrolling the city can be a kick on its own, although there isn't much variety beyond armed robberies and dangling window washers in need of rescue.

The controls are a bit wonky. Playing with the mouse is impossible, as the camera controls are too sensitive to navigate a fight without tilting back to look at the sky or zooming in on Spidey's bright-blue ass. A gamepad feels more natural, although even then movement seems too loose. There is little precision in swinging from one skyscraper to the next, let alone in dealing out combo attacks and whipping baddies around on web lines.

Plot has been taken from the comic saga that introduced the *Ultimate* version of Spider-Man's '80s arch-nemesis, Venom. The viewpoint constantly switches back and



Camera angles are so fine-tuned that boss battles, like this one against the Rhino, feature scenes that could have been clipped from a comic book.

forth between Spider-Man and his toothy rival on steroids. One mission you're zipping around as lithe Spidey, and the next you're stomping and smashing enemies as the Hulk-like Venom.

The only problem is that the connection between Spider-Man and Venom isn't properly explained. Same goes for most of the other relationships. Characters like the Human Torch and Mary-Jane are introduced without any set-up. And even though the game features a plethora of super-villains (there are great boss battles with the likes of the Rhino, Vulture, and Green Goblin), along with cameos from heroes such as Wolverine, famous supporting cast members like Aunt May and J.J.J. are nowhere to be found.

An even bigger issue is the plot's reliance on side missions that should be optional. To move the story along or trigger the switch from Spidey to Venom, you have to com-

plete races or wipe out a succession of rampaging gangs. That isn't really so bad—although the timed races can be extremely irritating due to the imprecise controls—but it's never spelled out exactly what you have to do to open up a story mission.

Too much time is spent wondering what you're supposed to be doing. At times cutscenes actively mislead you. When the game opens, for instance, Peter is in a big rush to get to school. But when you reach Midtown High, you race the Human Torch and the game leaves you hanging. You can't do anything at school, and the only options on the map are activating races and picking up collectibles like comic-book covers. This sort of thing happens all the way through the game; there are lots of "Huh?" moments livened up by sudden showdowns with big bads like the Rhino or the Green Goblin.

That the story is so disjointed is a real shame, because great cutscenes featuring the work of comic artist Mark Bagley are spread throughout the game. In-game artwork is also fantastic. Cel-shading techniques give the action a real comic-book feel, and the camera angles seem to have been tweaked so that almost every moment could be used as a comic-book panel.

Ultimate Spider-Man is one of those games that never realize their full potential because of design miscues. It's certainly a good bet for serious Spider-Fans, as well as *Ultimate* universe aficionados, but anyone else will find this a pretty mediocre beat-'em-up. —Brett Todd



[left] Cameo appearances include Spidey's old rival, the Human Torch. [below] Snikt! You want a piece of me, bub?



Alone in the D.A.R.K.

Monolith puts the F.E.A.R. of concrete and office buildings into players with its "Ghost Recon of the Dead"-styled spooky tactical shooter **F.E.A.R.** BY STEVE BAUMAN

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Scary System Requirement Shooter **Developer** Monolith
Publisher Sierra **ESRB** Mature **Requirements** 1.7GHz CPU; 512MB RAM; Hah, right... they're higher than whatever you have

Horror is tough to pull off in a videogame. It relies on manipulating the audience by controlling the pacing, which is completely at odds with a videogame where the player is in control. One alternative way to creep the player out is to create a general feeling of dread, something the few successful horror games—*Alone in the Dark* and *Undying* for the PC, *Fatal Frame* and *Silent Hill* on the consoles, among others—do particularly well. Most still resort to cheap jolts like breaking glass, people jumping at you from around corners, and rapid cuts for a bit of an adrenaline rush, but the console games in particular build mood through vagueness. Does anyone really understand what's going on at

Silent Hill? Does it matter? You know that whatever is going on is creepy and weird.

Monolith tries to both shock and set a mood with its spooky tactical shooter *F.E.A.R.*, with minimal effectiveness. It constantly smacks you over the head as if to say, "Look, isn't this scary?" There's creepy music that tells you when the scary bits are coming. There's freaky hallucinations. There's a lot of dark areas—the military still hasn't developed a flashlight that can operate for more than a few seconds. There's blood dripping from ceilings. There are apparitions. And there's the requisite little Goth girl with long black hair to "creep you out." Thanks to its overuse, it's become the lens flare of horror.

And none of this is scary. Which is kind of a problem.

It's hard not to be cynical that someone sat down in a meeting and decided to combine Tom Clancy and Japanese horror. The basic setup has you invading a very high-tech company full of secure doors, hidden gun turrets, and voice-mail with no passwords. There were experiments, there have been explosions, there are lots of guys running around in military gear shooting people. It's all very by the numbers and pre-

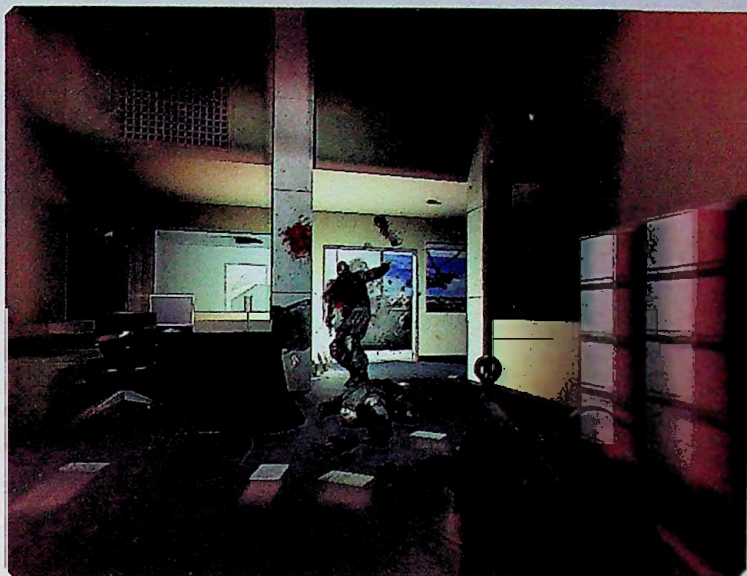
"There's the requisite little Goth girl with long black hair to 'creep you out.' Thanks to its overuse, it's become the lens flare of horror."

Stills don't do the combat justice. So here's some mostly post-combat shots.





{above} This guy doesn't seem friendly. [right] Slow motion... engaged.



dictable, with little of the personality and zing present in other Monolith games.

But it still works. Anyone's that's crept around a *Ghost Recon* map during a night mission or explored the "serial killer" level of *SWAT 4* is well aware of how much tension those games are able to generate without a single zombie or demon or upside down cross. Tactical shooters are all about pacing: the slow, methodical exploration before the inevitable explosion of action and violence.

So in a way, *F.E.A.R.* is "scary" in the same way any tactical shooter is scary. There's the legitimate fear of not knowing what's around the corner. To the game's considerable credit, most of the time nothing is there—unlike the obvious *DOOM 3*, it's not afraid of doing the unexpected or unpredictable, or merely doing nothing. Monolith bravely lets you spend a lot of time wandering through its environments with absolutely nothing happening, which is often much more tense than throwing wave after wave of bad guys at you. The pacing is ter-

rific. The combat comes in waves, but sometimes it's off a beat or two, just enough to screw around with the player. It's too bad the environments are so dull, boring, and generic, however. (If it misses a variation of "concrete," it isn't for a lack of trying.)

It's a good thing the combat sequences are anything but dull, boring, and generic. In fact, they're spectacular. Every time you pull the trigger of one of the three beefy guns you can carry at any time, something explodes or breaks into a bunch of pieces. Most battles leave the room full of smoke and debris, with enormous bullet holes everywhere. There's even melee combat, though it's less useful (and causes less stuff to break)

than just firing off a few more rounds. And ammo is more than plentiful, so fire away. (Note to people taking over a building: Do not leave extra guns, ammo, and first aid kits lying around on every surface.) The combat is easily the most visceral and chaotic found in any game, rivaling what is promised from supposed "next-generation" consoles. (And it's already here, today! In hi-def! And it's awesome! To the max!)

F.E.A.R. is all about the purity of single-player infantry combat, with no vehicles or other gimmicks getting in the way of a good firefight. (Multiplayer is fairly standard, with one mode featuring a novel take on the "bullet time" feature.) It's just you against some amazingly good AI. Your opposition dodges, ducks, takes cover, flanks, crawls under objects, jumps over stuff, and generally does the unexpected. You can switch into a *Max Payne*/*Matrix*-style bullet time, though it's less interesting than the moments where the game automatically switches into it for dramatic effect. (For example, it happens the first time you run into a certain bad guy.)

All of these effects come at a significant cost, however. At higher resolutions with every visual doodad enabled, *F.E.A.R.* humbles an Athlon FX-57 with 2GB of RAM and two 7800GTX cards in SLI. It scales down well to almost any machine near its required minimum, but there's little question it's made for next-generation machines, not just today's. Which is curious, because it's hard to say if it'll have the legs of, say, an MMO or even *Counter-strike*.

You can't blame the folks at Monolith for making a game whose main ambition seems to be to recreate the squad battles from *Half-Life*, mixed with a little bit of trendy Japanese horror. After all, when they did something original like *No One Lives Forever*, no one really bought it. (But everyone seems to have played it; weird, that.) That *F.E.A.R.* doesn't crumble under the pretensions of its horror plot—the ending, in particular, moves into serious "WTF?"-ville—or get boring because of its generic setting is a testament to Monolith's considerable skill at gameplay, design, and AI. It may not be much of a horror game, but it's a helluva shooter. ■



You know you didn't pick the lion

Black & White 2

Have a cow



Genre Take Two **Developer** Lionhead
Publisher Electronic Arts **ESRB** Teen
Requirements 1.6GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

It's a cow!

That's the highlight of *Black & White 2*. Of course, that was already in the original *Black & White*, so it's a bit sad that the greatest joy in this sequel—watching an evil battle cow stomp enemy armies—isn't that far removed from what you could already do in *Black & White*, the game whose name is synonymous with something deceptively cool at first, but ultimately disappointing if you bother to play it longer than three hours.

So you've got a cow who can use his udders to slap around enemy soldiers or to play bongo-style to entertain villagers. It's implausible that someone wouldn't choose the cow but just in case, there's also an ape, a cat, and a wolf. You probably took the cow. You've also got the same godly hand from the last game that could pick up stuff, stroke your cow, and ripple water. Together, these two typically Molyneux-esque ele-

ments set out to play a game. It's almost like a buddy movie where the two leads are cast and the rest of the movie is supposed to just, well, happen.

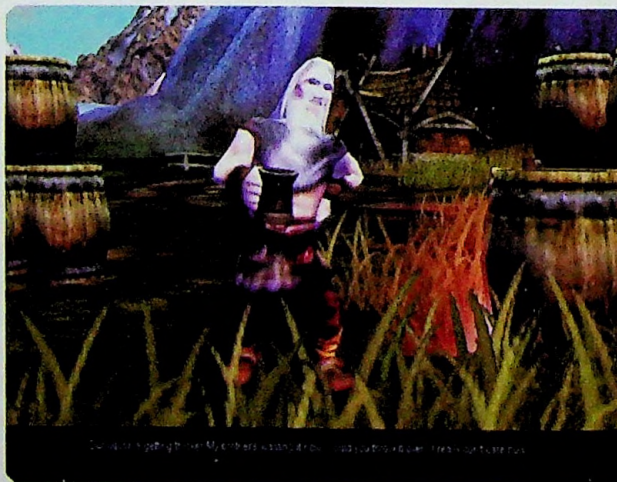
But first, there's about an hour of tutorials (in a patch, the developers graciously let you skip the first five minutes) that gradually give way to the game proper, which is a tedious real-time strategy game with a bad interface. The challenge is mainly one of population management. At its best, it plays out like a charming city builder with a lovely graphics engine. At its worst, it's a glitchy and game-y exercise in population management, right down to indelicate gender issues like assigning women to be bred and saving as many men as you can for your armies. The meticulous player might even go so far as weeding out the slower old folk, who eat up food without contributing to society.

Eventually, the cities grow in in-

verse proportion to your framerate. You move through each of the eight maps, doing quests to milk them for their fixed reservoirs of "tribute," which is the money of the gods. You spend tribute buying spells, upgrades for your cow (you know you took the cow), and buildings to fuss further with your population, right down to a fountain that lets you give individual people names if you're so inclined.

The cow is missing a lot of the inscrutability—and therefore personality—it had in the last game. Now it's little more

Playing god means doing quests for guys like this



He's a lot less annoying than *Black & White 2*'s other lead character, the hand. The initial charm of a disembodied hand that's either evil (unmanicured) or good (manicured) wears off pretty quickly. You have to pick out unassigned villagers, manually build walls, shuttle food to new towns, drop reinforcements into decimated armies, and carry those last bits of ore on the map to where they're needed. Apparently, being a god means struggling with a minimalist interface.

Then the fighting starts. You send around dumb clots of soldiers who occasionally collide with other dumb clots of soldiers. They deplete each other for a while until the biggest clot wins. The meticulous player can finesse it well enough to level up troops by reinforcing the clots and carefully outgaming the scripting. Everybody else will probably back themselves into untenable situations so that they have to completely restart the map and play it as a save/reload crawl.

And so, *Black & White 2* progresses from the Norse to the Japanese, to epic spells from *Populous*, to Aztecs, to the end of the game, to the opportunity to play it a second time with your powered-up cow. There is no sandbox mode, no skirmish, and no multiplayer. There's just a hand, a cow, and a game design that still isn't really working after a second go around. —**Tom Chick**

The screenshot shows a scene from 'The Sims 2: Pets'. In the center is a large, dark, multi-headed dragon-like creature. A speech bubble from the creature says 'I'm Over here'. The creature is in a circular arena surrounded by a crowd of small, colorful figures. In the background, there are mountains and a small town. A status bar at the bottom shows various icons and a paw print icon.



Still brutally, brilliantly short

Genre Short Add-on **Developer** Relic
Publisher THQ **ESRB** Mature
Requirements 1.8GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

The original *Dawn of War* is a fantastic real-time strategy game set in the war-torn *Warhammer 40K* universe; it was like watching a tabletop battle spring to life. Its only significant shortcoming is that its campaign, while brilliantly executed, is way too short. Enter the *Winter Assault* expansion, which includes a brand-new faction (the Imperial Guard), a new unit for each of the original four factions, 20 new skirmish/multiplayer maps, and several tweaks to the old tech tree. Despite all of the new goodies, the problem with *Winter Assault* is that its campaign, just like the original, is simply too short.

There are two mini-campaigns in the expansion, each telling the same story from a different (good or evil) perspective. In the Order campaign, you use the new Imperial Guard and Eldar, whereas the Chaos campaign focuses on Chaos and the Ork horde. Each mini-campaign consists of a paltry five missions. Even though each is rather long, taking anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes to complete, the campaign finishes just as you're getting used to using the Guard, and before you've even had the chance to use all of your toys. For example, you don't get



[top] The Imperial Guard's Baneblade is wicked.
[above] The campaign cutscenes use the in-game engine.

access to the Guard's hulking Ogryn infantry until the final mission, and the tough as nails Leman Russ battle tank doesn't see any action at all in the Order campaign.

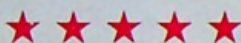
It's only frustrating because just like in the original game, what's there is really good; there just isn't enough of it. Sure, you can play the new skirmish maps and take the fight online. But for \$30, you expect a campaign with a little more teeth than one that you should finish within a few sessions.

Relic took a lot of heat from fans when it was revealed that the new faction would be the Imperial Guard rather than one of the more exotic 40K races such as the Necrons (Undead with guns) or the Tyranid (the original Zerg). The Imperial Guard just isn't all that sexy. However, Relic does a fine job of adding a few wrinkles to make them more interesting. For example, they can quickly transport units from building to building via underground tunnels. This allows the Guard to quickly move units around a map in preparation for either a defense or to launch an attack. It's also a fantastic way to shield a depleted infantry squad or to hide a TechPriest (the Guard's builder unit) from harm by simply garrisoning it inside a structure.

Anyone who plays the 40K tabletop game knows that the Imperial Guard is all about tanks and big guns. *Winter Assault* reflects this by stocking the Guard with units like the Basilisk and the Baneblade. The former

The Rise & Rise of Civilization

Follow-up: *Civilization IV* is every bit as good as we guessed (and hoped) it would be BY STEVE BAUMAN AND TOM CHICK



Genre Game of the Year Simulation Developer Firaxis Publisher 2K Games
ESRB E10 Requirements 1.2GHz CPU; 256MB RAM



Last month, the two of us "reviewed" *Civilization IV*. Because of the state it was in at the time, we didn't feel comfortable giving it a rating. For all we knew, the final version would crash, run poorly, or maybe just reformat your hard drive if you installed it to the wrong directory. So, we had to qualify most of our praise. Now that the full version is here, we're under no such restriction.

But first, a few caveats. Some people who skipped the DirectX install had problems launching the game. There were isolated instances of reference cards printed in French and mislabeled CDs. On some systems, the performance plummets during graphics-intensive late-game wars. Tooltips have a way of vanishing. The au-

tomated mailer doesn't work for PBEM games. There are some ways that the interface is curiously limited.

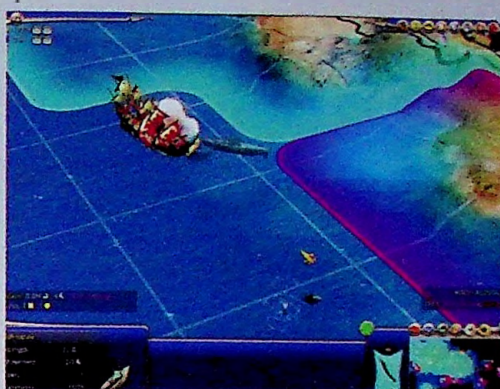
And that's pretty much as negative as we can get, so now we're just going to gush enthusiastically. This is easily the best version of *Civilization* ever made. It manages the apparent paradox of giving the series more complexity and depth while simultaneously making it easier to play. Almost every gameplay change shows a fundamental understanding of what's made the series uniquely appealing, while also managing to trim out those bits routinely criticized as "not fun": pollution, riots, and corruption as you knew them are gone. In their place are health values for each city, angry citizens who

is a mobile artillery unit that fires across the entire map and rains shells on an unsuspecting enemy. The Baneblade is arguably the best single unit in the game; this massive tank is decked out with 11 heavy weapons and withstands an enormous amount of punishment.

The new units for the established factions are welcome additions. The Space Marines get a new commander unit in the Chaplain, the Eldar get Fire Dragons (infantry designed to take out vehicles and buildings), Orks now field Mega Armored Nobz (regular Nob infantry but harder to kill), and Chaos has access to the close combat Khorne Berserker Infantry. The new units help to round out each faction's retinue, but there are also some significant changes to the fac-

tions aside from these new unit additions. Chaos, for instance, are tweaked in such a way to make them less similar to regular Space Marines. They lose access to plasma and flamer weapons and are now more of a close-combat faction than was the case in the original *Dawn of War*. The Space Marines no longer can slap a heavy bolter on a Predator tank. Changes like these dramatically alter the way you play each faction.

In the end, *Winter Assault* is a worthy, if a bit pricey, expansion. If you're more into the skirmish or multiplayer, it's easy to recommend as the 20 new maps add needed variety. (There's still no mission editor, oddly enough.). However, if you're after a meaty campaign, you're still going to feel a bit shortchanged. —William Abner



New and better combat, check. More interesting decisions, check. Improved interface and graphics, check. Better game, check.

sulk instead of working, and a unified national maintenance cost based on the number of cities and their distance from each other. They duplicate the same concepts as pollution, riots, and corruption, but they do it in a more manageable and intuitive way.

The pacing is immaculate. The variety is exhilarating. The new systems for combat and civics (openly cribbed from other games) fit seamlessly into the design and invite a greater sense of customization and therefore personal attachment. There's new flexibility in the tech tree (not to mention more importance in individual techs), a subtle and important religion system (that plays it a little too safe), and detailed worker improvements that lend personality to your cities, your civilization, and the entire map (it's not as daunting as it might look at first).

Sid Meier often says gaming is about "interesting decisions," and there's more of them—all with greater consequences that are

clear and obvious to players—in this edition than in past ones. *Civilization IV* is more than just interesting—it's compelling, addictive, nuanced, varied, attractive, and easily one of the best games of the year. ■

Blitzkrieg 2

Teetering on the edge of greatness



Genre CDV WWII RTS Developer Nival Interactive

Publisher CDV ESRB Teen

Requirements 1GHz CPU; 320MG RAM

Blitzkrieg was a popular real-time strategy game for both grognards and more casual fans of WWII. With a moddable game engine and a whole pile of expansions, it generated more interest than its low profile suggested. *Blitzkrieg 2*

adds a new 3D terrain engine that ups the graphical ante. For those looking for pausable real-time action that straddles the line between a wargame and an RTS, this is your game.

With three campaigns featuring Allied, German and Soviet troops, and the usual 100 and point gameplay, you'd be forgiven for thinking this is just another WWII game. When you dig a little deeper, it becomes clear that the game is a little less forgiving than most and strives for authenticity more often than pure playability. Getting a good strategic overview while paused is important to your initial plan,



while good tactical movement makes a huge difference in keeping your units alive. That's where the authenticity requires you



Heavy bombers deliver!

to recognize and counter particular unit types quickly and effectively, with a minimum of casualties. An extensive encyclopedia of wartime equipment found in the game helps you figure out what you're facing, and what to use against it. You can't just round everyone up and throw them at the front line, en masse, because many will die. Brainwork is required to win.

Campaign missions are mostly scripted affairs, with units waiting for you to arrive or setup to assault while you defend. There is little AI to speak of on the strategic level. This hurts the game's longevity in single player because it also means there's no way to skirmish a human-like AI to give players experience for multiplayer. You're either playing the campaign, loading up user-created missions, or going online to take on the world. If the game receives the same kind of user content support as the original, then single-player fans will find a lot to do over the long term. If not, expect to play the campaign missions on harder difficulties for replayability. That's not as bad as it sounds because the campaign is entertaining, but this is definitely the game's biggest failing. A skirmish AI would be immensely helpful for preparing to play online, as well as exciting in its own right.

If you do play online, this game has a long life. There are many different maps to choose from. You can set up your own options or play on a ladder that auto matches you with other players through Nival.net, the developer's own game service. After signing up for an account, you end up play-

ing with a lot of people from the developer's home country of Russia, and just about anywhere else in the world. *Blitzkrieg 2* is a global experience. The online game shows a completely different side of combat, since you're constantly in need of reconnaissance to properly counter your opponent. It's an exciting game of cat and mouse, and thrust and counter-thrust that feels a lot more like real war than the single-player missions. Even the right counter sometimes isn't enough to keep you alive, so being smart about fortifications and troop placement is just as important as knowing what you need and when. Multiplayer is a crucial part of the best that *Blitzkrieg 2* offers.

The game's audio is notable because it features superb explosions, good vocal cues for what your men are going through, and an excellent horn and drum-heavy soundtrack. The interface takes some time to learn and definitely could use some streamlining, but all the major functions you expect are there—order queuing, attack-move, hotkeys for just about everything. With just a couple hours of play, you're in detailed control of the battlefield.

Blitzkrieg 2 is a skirmish mode away from true greatness. It looks fantastic, adds more realism to the RTS formula than most other games, and has the legs that great multiplayer provides. If it had a real strategic and tactical AI to go along with these great features, it could be a gold standard for WWII real-time strategy. As it stands, it's just another very good game. —David J. Long

The Movies

Mr. Molyneux, we're ready for our close-ups

★ ★ ★ 1/2

Genre Star Simulator Developer Lionhead Studios

Publisher Activision ESRB Teen

Requirements 800MHz CPU; 256MB RAM

The *Movies* is three games in one, or more accurately, two games and an editing program. It's a tycoon-style strategy game that puts you in charge of a movie studio, and a *Sims*-style people simulator that forces you to satisfy the needs and egos of your stars to keep them sober and producing quality films. The moviemaker is pretty much its own thing, only required to make the highest-rated movies but it has little effect on either of the other two parts of the game.

The Movies is purely a sandbox game. There's little structure, or any missions or scenarios. You can set some starting parameters—year, amount of cash, whether you want a pre-built studio or not so you can just focus on making movies—but you're always trying to maintain your studio and make money.

Unsurprisingly, you make money producing movies. Though the structure of constructing a script, rehearsing, assigning directors and actors, and sending them off to shoot the film is similar to a little-known gem called *Hollywood Mogul*, Lionhead deserves a lot of credit for developing a unique interface. You spend a lot of time dragging people (with a funny "thwack" sound) to and from locations to drop them on objects to perform actions. Once writers create a script, you drag it to production. It's harder to describe than it is to actually utilize; this is one simple, polished, sophisticated, and terrific interface.

It's too bad it's attached to such a simple game. *The Movies* tries so hard to appeal to the masses that there's almost no challenge. The tycoon game is easy. Making money is merely a matter of making sure there's a steady stream of cheap and crappy films in the pipeline. (Hey, it works for Roger Corman.) It omits other interesting parts of the movie business—marketing, in particular—and instead opts for *Sims*-style people management.

This makes some sense. Obviously, juggling egos is a full-time job for people in Hollywood, but in *The Movies*, it's annoying. This type of "Sims-Tycoon" combination has



Shooting a hot lesbian scene in the classic "Angels Don't Pack Heat." You might want to case a man and a woman in these roles in 1940.

been done recently, by *Playboy The Mansion*. And both games suffer from similar problems. A game that focuses on celebrities or interpersonal relationships—say, *The Sims Superstar*—is fine because that's its shtick—it's a game about satisfying their wants and needs. But when you put that on top of a tycoon game, even one as simple as *The Movies*, it becomes busywork and gets in the way of what could be an interesting tycoon sim. Just as running a magazine might be fun (hah!), who wouldn't want to run a movie studio? Making movies is inherently interesting; babysitting

has not. This leads to the rather depressing notion that having big stars, expensive sets, and fancy costumes denotes "quality." (This is understandable, and in no way a criticism; it's just the reality of the technical limitations of "rating" the aesthetics of something with a computer.)

The script serves as a template for how to shoot the movie (you have a very limited ability to change a scene while it's being shot). You choose the set, the props, the actors, the costumes, and pick from a large number of set shots. You chain them to-

actors is not.

As dull as the people management is, the moviemaking feature is fantastic. While you don't have to create your own scripts, it's the easiest way to goose their rating, and therefore the amount of money they're likely to make at the box office. *The Movies* isn't sophisticated enough to actually rate your skill as a moviemaker, so it looks at the compo-

nent parts of your film to gauge its quality. This leads to the rather depressing notion that having big stars, expensive sets, and fancy costumes denotes "quality." (This is understandable, and in no way a criticism; it's just the reality of the technical limitations of "rating" the aesthetics of something with a computer.)

It used to be that Peter Molyneux designed games of indirect control; you meddled with the world, not with its individuals. *The Movies* changes that, and the results are less interesting as a result. *The Movies* is often fantastic and occasionally annoying. Though the tycoon game is merely adequate, the moviemaking is strong enough to raise it up a notch. While a few games have let you create and edit movies in the past (*Stunt Island*, *Red Baron*), nothing has ever given wannabe directors this much control and content at their disposal. People will create amazing movies with *The Movies*; it's a good thing they can ignore most of the game to create their mini masterpieces. —Steve Bauman

(clockwise from upper left) Shooting a Nazi family drama; When you need a quality action scene, you call on the chicken; Is this a future star?





Got Wood?

The schizophrenic **Age of Empires III** is full of compelling ideas; if only there was a way to appreciate it

BY BRUCE GERYK



Genre Peon Management Simulation **Developer** Ensemble Studios
Publisher Microsoft Games **Requirements** 1.4GHz CPU; 256MB RAM **ESRB** Teen

Back when real-time strategy designers only had to simulate the complex geopolitical relations between Orcs and Humans, economic modeling in these games could be restricted to the contributions of wood and gold to building a mechanical zeppelin. In a complete reversal that some would call a design advance, *Age of Empires III* is ultimately a game about the incidental geopolitical effects of wood and gold gathering. Oh yeah, and food. Don't say real-time strategy hasn't evolved.

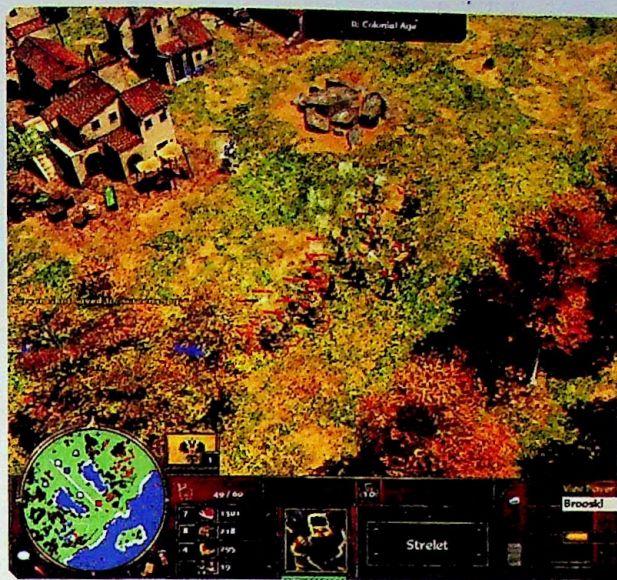
From a thematic perspective, the game is a huge success. Frontier colonists surely had to worry about the basics of economics—If you didn't collect enough food and building materials, you were dead. But from a game design perspective, it's not so exciting to play an hour-long game in which you're mostly concerned about what each individual peon—sorry, “settler”—is doing. It's a giant economic flowchart that all funnels through the balance sheet: Want to plan a multi-pronged offensive? Start counting planks of wood and food and population and whatnot, because the game isn't going to do it for you.

Which is the other half of the problem. This sense that you're only indirectly managing a war by micromanaging an economy isn't bad in itself. *Rise of Nations* gives you a lot of choices that

have cascading economic effects, all of which make the game rich without burying players in detail. *Age of Empires III* is all about the detail, so much so that you don't really get to appreciate the larger environment. And that's a real shame, because the larger environment has some great ideas.

The most interesting idea is both thematically brilliant and mechanically elegant. Each empire has a “home city” that periodically sends aid to the overseas colony in the form of resources or units. The real genius is that this takes the form of a “card deck” of up to 20 cards, each of which has restrictions on use (number of times used, limited to a certain Age). As you earn experience points in the game, you accumulate credit toward your next “shipment.” When you reach the next threshold, you earn a shipment, which allows you to play a card. Some shipments are special units that are only available this way, and can only be sent once. Because you can build multiple decks and can choose which to use after you've seen the map, you have a lot of room to try different strategies. You unlock better cards by “leveling up” your cities, which can be done in solo play or multiplayer. It gives you far more reason to keep playing than the story-driven campaign, and provides the kind of extra-game choices rarely seen in RTS skirmish play.

The game even uses the experience-for-shipments mechanic to drive gameplay in interesting new directions. Many maps have “trade routes” of various lengths on which players can build trading posts. These earn experience over time, which helps get more



[clockwise from above left] Even battles have to be micromanaged; Unlocking cards is a great carrot to anticipate; Each civilization has its own advantages. The Turks just crank out settlers.

cards into play faster. There are Indian settlements scattered around the map, which allow players to gain units and bonuses with the proper buildings. These settlements and trade routes cannot be destroyed (although the players' buildings on them can be) which can make the game an interesting chess match to gain economic advantage.

This is the kind of design innovation that could make this game great, yet ends up demonstrating the game's schizophrenia. For example, the home city shipments arrive at a designated building and, if they are economic resources, have to be unpacked by settlers. This means that resource shipments need to go to settler-populated and protected regions, while military units are often sent to front-line outposts. But there's no way to differentiate between military shipments and economic shipments, so you have to re-designate the target building each time you change the type of shipment. Because you can save up shipments and send them in quick succession, which is useful when you're waiting for

"Want to plan a multi-pronged offensive? Start counting planks of wood and food and population and whatnot..."

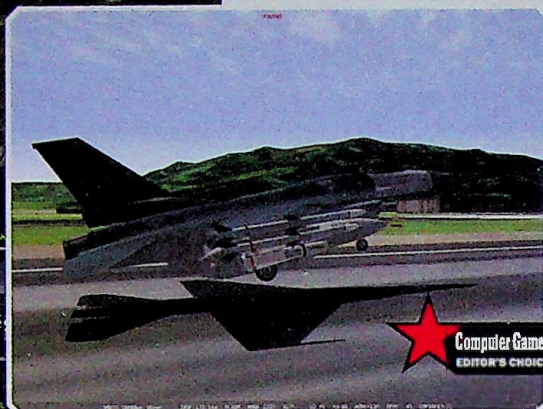
some advanced Age-specific cards to become available, this requires a lot of pointless clicking. Which is something the game is really good at.

Really, really good at. Seriously, there is so much missing from the interface that you could write a thousand-word review just listing the omissions. And what's worse, the game pretends it isn't happening. To even see basic—yet essential—information like how many settlers you have doing what, you have to enable

something called the "advanced" UI. It's as though the game wants you to relax and enjoy the forest even though the whole design demands that you ignore it to focus on every single tree individually. It's frustrating, and totally nuts.

There have been several notable games in the past few years that essentially redefined what a standard interface should be for their genres. *Age of Empires III* tries to change its genre's design direction while pretending *Rise of Nations* doesn't exist. Idle settlers stand around unless you specifically tell them what to do. Mines run out of gold and you really have to be paying attention to realize it. And the number of times players can pause in multiplayer games is limited, with no way to change the settings. In fact, there are a lot of settings you can't change, like the game speed in the campaign. Someone really dropped the ball on the interface, and the game suffers greatly for it. And you can't help feeling it was all deliberate.

In the end, it's a real shame. Even if you have no idea what a Finnish Haka is, Ensemble has done a great job of making you want to find out. The combination of unlocking cards, arranging decks, and all the varied civilization abilities—the different factions are well-defined and well-differentiated—would make for a very compelling game if only there was a chance to appreciate it. With so many choices and strategies available, the whole thing is about who builds the most peons—sorry again!—and makes sure each is doing his individual settler job best. And that's a weird way to make a game about New World discovery. ■



[left] Allied Force has sharp new cockpits chock full of intimidatingly realistic systems. [above] New pilots will find landing as big a challenge as combat.

Zombie Flight Sims... From the Grave!

Falcon 4.0 and Battle of Britain live again in **Allied Force** and **Wings of Victory**

BY DENNY ATKIN

Despite their impressive graphics and physics, today's flight simulators pale in many ways when compared to the hardcore ones that helped drive the genre into the tiny niche it inhabits today. Gone are the living battlefields of yesteryear, the elaborate, super-detailed dynamic campaigns that took so long and cost so much to develop that they helped turn Spectrum Holobyte and Rowan Software from mainstays to memories. That doesn't mean you're doomed to forever play canned missions, however. **Falcon 4.0: Allied Force** (Graphisim/Teen/★★★★½) and **Battle of Britain II: Wings of Victory** (GMX Media/E10+/★★★★) try to breathe new life into a pair of sims that featured the pinnacle of dynamic flight sim campaigns. *Falcon 4.0*, first released in 1998, is back and armed for action, while *Battle of Britain* (first released in 2001) isn't quite combat-ready.

Both have actually been in continuous development for years: *Falcon 4.0* using illegally leaked source code, and *Battle of Britain* using source [code?] the original developer made freely distributable. The developer of *Allied Force*, Lead Pursuit, took many of its ideas from various enthusiast *Falcon 4.0* add-ons and enhancements and rolled its own improvements. Shockwave built on work started by the BOB-MA freeware development group to create *Wings of Victory*.

Allied Force incorporates everything that made so many people fanatically passionate about the original *Falcon 4.0*: a fully dy-

namic and immersive campaign, authentic flight modeling, and obsessive attention to modeling the F-16 fighter jet's various systems and radar modes. To this it adds updated graphics, modernized cockpits, more stable multiplayer, and an entire new theater of action.

The first thing you notice is the ultra-detailed cockpit, which looks as good as one found in any recent title. The 3D virtual cockpit is less detailed but offers fantastic situational awareness. *Allied Force*'s support of TrackIR hardware, which lets you pan your view using head movements, is top-notch. Novice fliers take note: The cockpit is just as intimidating as in the original. An optional, simplified radar lets you ignore gain, antenna tilt, and other esoterica, but you still have to deal with multiple weapons systems, hostile environments, and a plane that's a bitch to land. The printed Basic Operations Manual that gets you started is 108 pages. The full PDF manual clocks in at 716 pages, which is over \$70 to print at Kinko's. This isn't a sim for the point-the-plane-and-shoot crowd.

Though *Allied Force*'s terrain can't compare to newer sims such as *Lock On: Modern Air Combat*, it looks dramatically better than

"The full PDF manual for Allied Force clocks in at 716 pages, which is over \$70 to print at Kinko's. This isn't a sim for the point-the-plane-and-shoot crowd."

the original *Falcon 4.0*, eliminating the tiled look in favor of far better terrain textures. F-16s and some of the AI planes have been given dramatic exterior upgrades, while other aircraft remain decidedly low-polygon. Effects have been beefed up, with better clouds and improved explosions.

Along with the original Korean conflict, *Allied Force* adds a new Balkan theater with campaigns in three time periods: the 1990s, today, and 2010. They differ primarily in the level of military hardware used. The campaign AI has been improved, made more convincing and challenging. The most engaging addition is the Forward Air Controller role, where you can locate targets and call in AI packages to strike them.

Multiplayer is much more stable and better-performing than in the original once you get connected, but there's no matchmaking application. You get to deal with host IP addresses, opening ports, and other retro networking frustrations.

At least *Allied Force* has multiplayer. *Wings of Victory* fixes the unstable, poorly performing multiplayer of the original *Battle of Britain* by leaving it out entirely. Instead, Shockwave focused on enhancing the single-player experience, to great success. When the sim works, that is.

The flyable planes—both RAF and Luftwaffe—have been completely redone, and the detailed 3D cockpits rival those found in the *IL-2/Pacific Fighters* series. Terrain, though improved, remains fairly flat and uninteresting. Flight modeling feels very authentic, with pronounced performance and handling differences in the planes. Despite the realism, this sim is much easier to learn to fly than *Falcon*, though landing safely is a bitch here as well.

The dynamic campaign is virtually unchanged from the original release, but that's a good thing. Directing the defense of Britain (or the offense against it) has the feel of a basic wargame, with defeats and successes having dramatic effects on the tides of the conflict. Playing each side is markedly different: as the Brits, your mission choices will be reactionary, while the Germans are forced to take an aggressive stance.

Unfortunately, along with great planes and engaging core gameplay come stability problems. A patch was required to get the sim stable enough for review. While it fixed frame-rate issues some users reported with the original release, it didn't solve the crashing issues. It frequently drops to the desktop when merely choosing single-player missions.

Allied Force is a must-buy for serious jet sim fans, whether or not you own the original *Falcon 4.0*. The improved graphics, support for modern hardware, and enhanced campaigns come together to make a seven-year-old sim a more engaging experience than anything released since. When *Wings of Victory* works, it sucks you into the experience of defending (or attacking) England like no other game. But you may want to watch for

further patches, lest you experience the frustration of seeing the white cliffs of Dover replaced by the Windows desktop in the midst of heated battle. ■



[above] The skies are overcast with bombers in some missions in *Wings of Victory* (That's a bullet mark on armored glass, not bird poo.) [right] The plane graphics look as good as any modern sim.



Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06

At least they added some spiffy new bugs



Genre Standard EA Sports Clone
Developer/Publisher EA Sports ESRB Everyone
Requirements 800MHz CPU; 128MB RAM

Did you like *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005*? EA Sports apparently loved last year's game so much that they've repackaged it as *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*. The latest addition to the best golf franchise on the market is a carbon copy of its predecessor, with the same graphics, most of the same modes of play, and pretty much the same lineup of pro golfers. Who would ever have thought that EA Sports would do such a thing?

There's probably no need for sarcasm, but it's hard not to be snarky when you consider that this game is even closer to its forerunner than the usual packages of roster updates and improved lens flare that makes up most of the annual EA Sports updates. All that's been added is a new mode of play that lets you challenge golfing greats from the past century and a serious display bug that render aspects of the game unplayable for NVIDIA videocard owners. The bottom line is that the game crashes. A lot.

You can't get into the main PGA Tour career mode with a custom player. It worked fine with included pros like Tiger, Jim Furyk, or Mike Weir, but going the amateur route and making the big time with a golfer of your own choosing—which is easily the most enjoyable mode of play—caused an immediate drop to the desktop. Switching to another system running an ATI card solved that particular problem, though there are reports of ATI users experiencing similar issues.

So, caveat emptor and all that. Even without this bug, *Tiger Woods 06* is a questionable purchase for anyone who still owns last year's game. The only significant addition is a new career-play option called Rivals, where you take a custom-created amateur on a quest through time to become the greatest golfer ever.

It isn't good enough to make this retread



Welcome to The Legend of Bagger Todd.

worth \$40, but, admittedly, it's awfully cool. You bop around through the past 150 years or so, taking on the greatest golfers of different eras in a wide range of skill competitions. It plays sort of like last year's Legends mode and career play all smushed together. One moment you're taking on Old Tom Morris in a 19th century tourney on the Old Course at St. Andrews, the next you're trying to out-putt Jack Nicklaus at Pebble Beach in the 1960s.

Each era comes complete with clothing and golfing equipment true to the time, so it really feels like you're doing the time warp (it's just a step to the right, after all). This is especially nifty in the 19th century, as you play with old-fashioned wooden clubs and a dark, sewn-cover ball that looks like a tiny baseball.

Still, it's not perfect. Many challenges are gimmicky putting, driving, or chipping showdowns. Just like in the 2005 edition, there isn't an option to immediately retry a failed event. Screw up and you have to go back to the main menu and load the course all over again. This 30-second delay isn't so bad in longer, stroke-play events, but when you're trying to be the closest to the pin in three shots, you can spend more time on the loading screen than on the virtual links.

That's about it for significant new stuff, although some odds and ends have been tossed in. EA Tiburon has refined the face-in-the-game player editor, now called Game Face, to the point where it creates uncannily accurate likenesses. TrueSwing has been upgraded with improved feel and a putt analyzer, although you still can't adjust mouse sensitivity. The latter can be a major issue,

too, if you've got a laser or gaming mouse. A Logitech MX-1000 laser mouse, for instance, is so touchy that it took hours to get comfortable with the short game and putting on intermediate difficulty and above.

Still, there's no denying that the *Tiger Woods PGA Tour* series plays an absolutely outstanding game of golf. If you don't have last year's game, and are some-

how sure you can avoid the bugs, this is a five-star purchase. But those are some pretty big if's. —Brett Todd

Rome: Total War— Barbarian Invasion

In Hoc Signo Vinces



Genre Expanding Strategy
Developer Creative Assembly **Publisher** Sega
ESRB Teen Requirements Rome Total War

Barbarian Invasion is the rather obvious expansion to last year's strategy hit *Rome: Total War*. Where the original had you break out of Italy to build an empire, *Barbarian Invasion* has you rip it to pieces or, if you prefer, try to hold it against the rampaging hordes. Most of the game has the same formula that made *Rome* such a huge success, but there are a few additions that make it well worth the extra denarii.

Naturally, the barbarians are the stars of the show. Many of them start as "hordes," which are

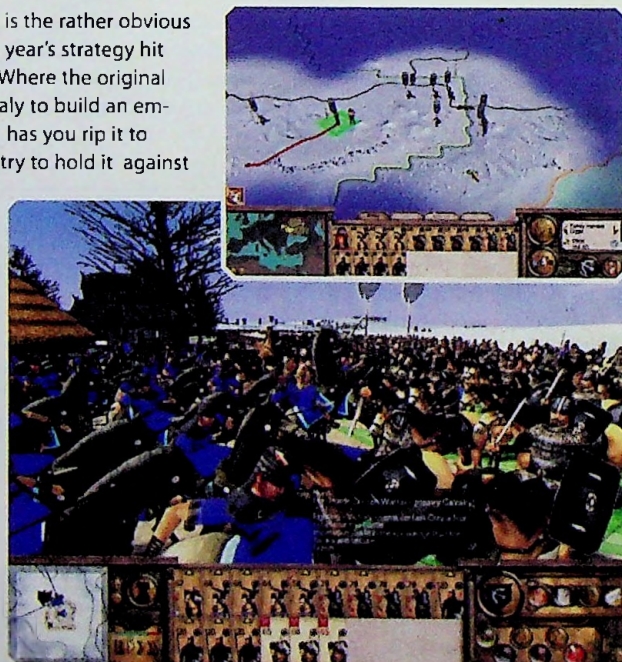
[upper right] A horde on the move. [right] All the pretty horses.

huge armies with no cities or upkeep cost. While a horde, these factions can choose to sack a city instead of capturing it, grabbing everything of worth before moving on. As you settle into newly captured towns, your massive armies start to fade away. Until then, you and your nomadic horsemen of doom can steamroll through much of Europe.

Victory, however, depends on building a new empire on the ruins of the old, so eventually you have to get out of killing mode and become more civilized. *Barbarian Invasion* introduces the rise of Christianity as Rome's national religion by forcing you to tend to the spiritual needs of both ruler and subject. Conversion of citizens from one faith to another happens at a shocking rate. Tear down a temple and put a pagan zealot in charge of Constantinople and you can have the people worshipping trees and rocks within a few years. Your generals can convert too, but more slowly.

The non-horde factions, particularly the Romans, require a skilled hand. Rebel towns are now rival Roman factions and can take away disloyal generals. There never seems to be enough money to go around, and there is not a lot you can do when a few thousand Goths show up outside Constantinople.

The battles have always been the big draw of the *Total War* games, and they've been improved here too. Night battles look great, as the torch light casts a spooky glow on the horizon. The tactical AI is better, though still



prone to sending its general into the middle of a forest of spearmen. There are the usual faintly ridiculous units, like armies of Sarmatian Virgins dressed like Brunhilde in a sundress, but the *Total War* games are more sword-and-sandal movies than PBS.

Barbarian Invasion is not a major step forward in the series, but there is certainly enough new here to recommend it to even casual fans. If you are still getting your posterior kicked by Carthage, you might want to hold off until you master the original campaign. But if you are up for some good old-fashioned pillaging, this is the best game in town. —Troy S. Goodfellow

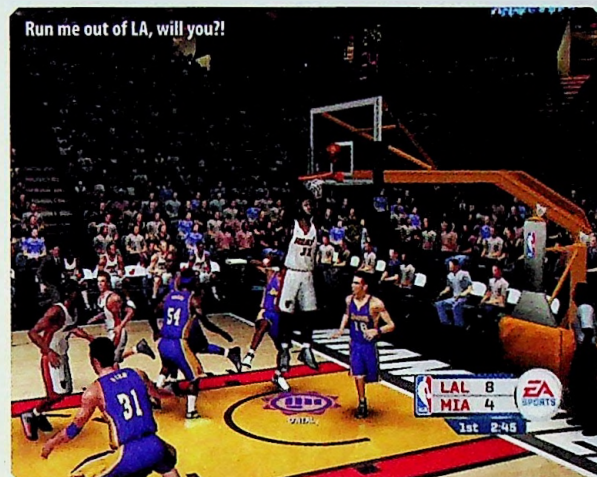
It's actually a classic good idea gone bad. There is something very cool about designating Shaq as a power player and letting him pull off monster drives and dunks, setting Ben Wallace up as a ball-stealing stopper, and making Vince Carter a highflyer who can murder you from all over the court.

But EA pushed Shaq and friends too far. Superstar stunts are often virtually unstoppable, and there are no limits on how often they can be performed. Games play out like a freak show, with stars hitting one crazy move after another from tip-off to the final buzzer. So there's even less of an incentive than ever to try playing authentic basketball.

You have to look hard to spot the other changes. The pace is a touch slower this year, although all this does is make it easier to score. Coaches, scouts, and trainers can now be hired in Dynasty mode, but their roles are inconsequential. Scouts are particularly annoying, as they provide nothing besides trivia and truly dumbass observations. Allen Iverson is the offensive power in Philadelphia? Really? Who

would have known that the NBA's leading scorer, a guy who knocked down 60 points in one game last year, could be such a threat?

EA Sports has a built-in audience for roster updates like *NBA Live 06*, so from a marketing perspective it's totally understandable that its franchises aren't overhauled every year. But that doesn't make the practice defensible from the consumer's point-of-view, nor does it make these hack jobs worth your time and money. —Brett Todd



NBA Live 06

New year, same old arcade b-ball

★ 1/2

Genre Yearly EA Sports Roster Update
Developer/Publisher EA Sports **ESRB** Everyone
Requirements 1GHz CPU; 128MB RAM

EA Sports must have had the cruise control on when it developed *NBA Live 06*. It seems awfully familiar, with the same arcade-first feel and attitude that's come to characterize this franchise.

Real basketball actually takes even more of a backseat this year. The introduction of an arcade gimmick called Freestyle Superstars gives the brightest lights in the NBA access to moves so spectacular that they unbalance play and enforce an *NBA Jam* mindset in players.

League MVP, huh? Start draining those threes already, Nash!



FOUR WORD REVIEWS

Sometimes you can say more with less. Here's a slightly shorter analysis of some recent games.



X-MEN LEGENDS II

"Apocalyptic anomalies annihilate adversaries."



BET ON SOLDIER

"Developer deals crap hand."



MYST V

"End of adventure age."



FANTASTIC 4

"Fellowship of The Thing."

Have some four word reviews of your own?
Send them to editor@cgonline.com

More, More, More

Call of Duty 2 features more intensity, more scripting, more Nazis, but not just more of the same

BY BRETT TODD

★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Nazi-shooting FPS **Developer** Infinity Ward **Publisher** Activision
ESRB Teen **Requirements** 1.4GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Like many WWII shooters, *Call of Duty 2* opens with a cinematic montage of what you can expect to be seeing over the next dozen hours or so. Soldiers go over the top, guns blazing. Nazis get shot. Planes strafe city streets. Nazis get shot. Tanks roll through the desert. Nazis get shot. And so on.

While this is an extremely effective way to open a sequel largely about killing Nazis in fascinating ways, it's counter-productive in that it also triggers a flashback to all of the WWII games we've been blitzkrieged with over the past few years. It doesn't exactly whet your appetite for more carnage in the French countryside when these allegedly blood-pumping scenes just cause you to think "Man, haven't I played this game a dozen times before?"

And you probably have. Infinity Ward relies entirely on the WWII shooter template that it helped create back in 2003, crafting a follow-up almost exactly the same as its predecessor. More realism moves gameplay to a middle ground that impressively straddles the extremes of arcade and tactical

Bring in the gimp, comrade.



shooters. But the heart of this shooter remains the tightly scripted tension that you found either pulse-pounding or predictable in the original game and its *United Offensive* expansion pack.

Levels should kick off with title screens reading "When last we met..." Two years may have passed, but it still feels like you're walking straight from one *Call of Duty* into another. The 27 missions of the three campaigns should be awfully familiar. First you shove the Germans out of Moscow and Stalingrad. Then it's off to North Africa for the British push to get Rommel out of Egypt. Finally, you join American GIs as they invade France on D-Day.

An incredible amount of graphical detail is packed into these been-there, done-that settings, though. Soldier faces are so realistically modelled you can see the relief on a Tommy's face after a crashing plane narrowly misses his troop convoy. Bullets tear chunks from walls. Smoke blankets entire streets during firefights. It's pretty much exactly like the first game, just cranked up to 11.

Yet this fantastic detail is devoted to clearing apartment buildings room by room, chucking grenades into machine-gun nests, and storming a French beach (Pointe du Hoc, which is really just Omaha with cliffs) for the gazillionth time. Even the change-of-pace missions are afflicted with seenitbeforeitis. You spot for artillery, shoot down Stukas with an AA gun, and even man the gun on an armored car while the driver gets lost (yeah, that's never been done in a shooter before). The sole sprinkling of newness

[left] Combat is more in your face than ever. Just ask this guy. [right] Enjoy that Nuremberg rally in hell, Fritz!



comes from occasionally being able to complete objectives in varying order. Enjoy déjà vu? Then this is your game.

Kind of. Even though we've seen all of this stuff before, it's never been done better. You always know what's coming around the next French hedgerow, but you still hold your breath during missions because of the insane mayhem that is *Call of Duty* combat. So many bullets are flying and grenades exploding and soldiers screaming that it's impossible to exhale until you've made absolutely certain that there are no Krauts left to sing the "Horst Wessel Song." Missions like Pointe du Hoc, the assault on the German lines in Libya, and the final clearing of Stalingrad take WWII shooter clichés to a whole new level of intensity.

Dumping arcade elements of the first game and sticking with a checkpoint-only save system help make battles so fresh and intense. So you've got to say goodbye to the health meter and battlefield health packs. Neither are missed, though. You're now informed of the grim reaper's approach by heavy breathing, blurry vision, and—in case the above doesn't clue you in that you're dying, stupid—a red aura on the edges of the screen. And this damage can only be mended by taking cover and waiting for time to heal those wounds, which means you can't charge enemy lines knowing that you'll conveniently discover a health pack before meeting a bullet with your name on it.

Still, nobody's going to confuse *Call of Duty 2* with a tactical shooter. While some of the stereotypical shooter fog that hung over the original game has been blown away, you still single-handedly slaughter enough Germans to win the war through attrition.

On the regular difficulty setting, a dozen rounds thud into your chest before you even



[left] Hogan would never have believed it, but Sgt. Schultz fought to his dying breath. [below] While cinematic moments like this plane crash in the Egyptian desert may be predictable, that doesn't make them any less awesome to witness.



need a time-out, and you can recover from nearly mortal injuries in seconds.

Other aspects of game design also walk the line between shooter-superman stuff and "Hey, I bet it really was sort of like this in El Alamein!" A squad of allies accompany you every step of the way, and they do a fantastic job of adding authenticity by calling out enemy positions, yelling warnings about grenades, and simply hurling colorful insults at Nazis like "Have a grenade, you fascist pig!" and "I'll piss on you in hell!" (Teen rating, huh?)

Allies are also pretty smart. While squadmates generally let you lead the way, they sometimes kill enemies before you can. This can be a little frustrating, in that they occasionally blow the head off an MG-42 gunner right before you pull the trigger to take him out yourself, but such good AI still adds to the feeling that you're working with a team and not pulling a Rambo.

Mostly, though, buddies are cannon-fodder who get gunned down a little too easily. Dozens die in every mission. Aside from a few characters who figure in the plot—like comic-relief Scotsman MacGregor in the British campaign—a never-ending stream of troops immediately replace those who fall in the line of duty. The new guys sometimes charge out of a bunker like clowns out of a little car, so there's no sense of attachment adding gravitas to battles. Who cares if Adams, Stevens, and Jones get gunned down attacking that AA gun when Smith, Davidson, and Terry will be right along to take their places?

Enemy AI is a little brighter, and much more aggressive. Germans take cover, retreat under heavy fire, man MG-42s when their original operators are killed, and throw an endless supply of grenades whenever you take a breather. They take that Master Race crap seriously, too, and fight to the bitter end. Fail to completely riddle one of the Wehrmacht's finest with bullets and he

often crawls or limps away to recover, or pulls out a Luger and squeezes off a few shots with his dying breath.

Not nearly as much ingenuity is shown with multiplayer as it is with dying bad guys. All of the game types and even some favorite maps have been ported directly from the first game. Virtually all of the nifty innovations from the *United Offensive* expansion have been dropped, including driveable vehicles and the great Domination and Base Assault games. New modes of play have been added in Headquarters and Search and Destroy, but they're conventional variations on objective-based MP.

Multiplayer shortcomings and solo predictability aside, *Infinity Ward* lays claim to the creation of the ultimate WWII shooter with *Call of Duty 2*. While this sequel won't change the minds of gamers sick of booting the Nazis out of France and Russia every couple of months, it trumps previous experiences by balancing visceral, reasonably authentic combat with outstanding, action-first playability.

That said, can everyone finally stop making WW II games now? ■

NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2005

Another year, another obsession

★★★★½

Genre Voluminous Sports-management Sim
Developer/Publisher Sports Interactive
ESRB Everyone **Requirements** 433MHz CPU;
128MB RAM

Sports Interactive is more like a cult than a designer of sports management simulations. It's a good thing the UK-based developer doesn't use its powers for evil purposes, because if it did, a lot of sports nuts would be shaving their heads and heading to the airport.

A great new case in point is *NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2005*. It should be classified as an addictive substance right up there with nicotine. It includes pretty much the entire hockey world, with over 33,000 accurately modeled players and dozens of leagues from every corner of the globe.

Possibilities are almost limitless in a game with this scope, assuming you're a fairly hardcore hockey fan and can handle the learning curve. Gameplay follows the pattern set by the first version of *NEHM* released in 2004, but adds a ton of subtle enhancements, like licenses for the AHL and ECHL and the NHL's new rules (including the shootout—sorry, purists) and salary cap.

SI still needs to streamline the interface, although life is made easier by amenities like detailed player bios and prospect report cards drawing comparisons with name players. Why wade through names and numbers when you can hone in on the Alex Mogilny and ignore the Wade Belaks? Judging weaknesses is also a snap now, thanks to the inclusion of an organization-wide depth chart and an in-game tactical view letting you see who's flying and who needs a trip to the press box.

Sims remain slow when running a few countries. SI doesn't have a handle on how junior leagues work in Canada. Unlike in real life, players can't jump from second-tier leagues like the CJHL to major circuits such as the OHL in mid-season. Prospects don't seem to recognize junior tiers, either. So Junior B players sometimes turn down drool-worthy offer from clubs like the Peterborough Petes.



Looking good in Peterborough.

At any rate, these flaws aren't game-breakers. If you dream it, you can do it here. Well, as long as those dreams involve managing a hockey club to on-ice glory. *NEHM 2005* isn't much good if your fantasies involve dancing with Barishnikov, but if this is the ticket if you want to win a virtual Stanley Cup.—Brett Todd

Down in Flames

Messerschmitt the Gathering

★★★★

Genre Cards of War **Developer/Publisher** Battlefront.com **ESRB** Not Rated
Requirements 500MHz CPU; 128MB RAM

There's a good chance you haven't heard much about *Down in Flames*. It's one of those titles that could fly under the radar of a lot of gamers, pun intended. It's a card combat game set in the skies of WWII. You create pilots, send them into battle, and, if they survive, spend the experience they gain. It's the lightest flying game you will play this year, and probably the most addictive.

The wartime setting is more than a shell. You get historic aircraft from four nations, each with their own attributes. Plane abilities are abstracted to a few key ratings that determine how many cards your pilots have at any given moment. So, if you don't know your Stukas from a hole in the ground, there's no harm done.

The core of the game is the head-to-head combat with the AI or human opponents. Inexperienced pilots are practically slaves to the luck of the draw. It's advisable to send them against computer-controlled

opponents until you get your wings. Each card you play can be countered by a few others. Play one without getting countered and you can achieve positional advantage, which gives you more shots, or score a hit with your guns. It is hard to separate luck from skill. If you have a handful of bullets but no maneuvering, you may never get to fire those shots. It's infuriating at times, but that's the luck of the draw.

If it sounds simple, that's because it is.

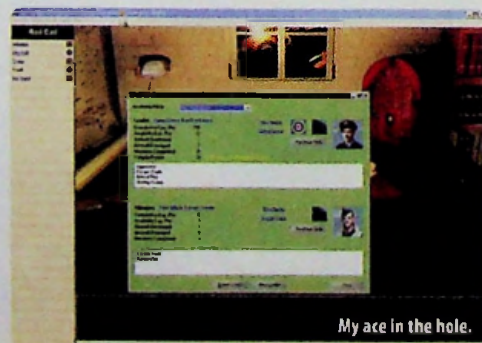
But simplicity is not the same as simple-mindedness. As in any good card game, you need to do a bit of card counting and play your hand right. Discarding and targeting decisions can be difficult, especially when you are flying wounded. Things get really interesting in the campaign mode. Here, fatigue and limited resources come into play in a way they don't in the dogfight mode.

If gaming is about interesting decisions, *Down in Flames* is full of them. None of it is done with gimmicky graphics, arbitrary dice rolls, or rock-paper-scissors. *Down in Flames* is a testament to how a solid card game design can be translated to the computer with a minimum of chrome and not lose the features that were the point of the game to begin with.

The campaign interface is terrible. You have to go to a webpage, set up the campaign, and then join it from the main game menu. There are too many steps involved in setting up anything, and finding a human opponent you want to duel is a matter of yelling, "Anyone got a 15-point pilot?" in the chat room.

Down in Flames is a change of pace for Battlefront, a company best known for its accurate but accessible combat sims. It's one of the least likely developers for a game of this sort, but it's always invested in quality. Support this company. Buy this game.

—Troy S. Goodfellow



My ace in the hole.

revisionist history

By Bruce Geryk

Seven Cities of Gold

In search of old New Worlds

Do you remember sitting in school, wishing your history class would be over so that you could run home and play *Seven Cities of Gold* and create your own history where you were a European explorer searching for riches and renown on an unexplored continent? If so, keep it to yourself, because that's seriously creepy. But any game you played as a kid has to be better than anything available today, because that's one of the laws of gaming. Or at least game remembering.

Released in 1984 for the Apple II, Commodore 64, and Atari 800, and in 1987 for whatever machine followed the PC Jr., *Seven Cities of Gold* is the game Dani Bunten made to prove she wasn't just the genius who wrote *M.U.L.E.* I guess that's assigning an arbitrary motive to the game's development. *Seven Cities of Gold* was a game that reflected the most basic desires of computer gamers: the ability to envision a huge world inside the computer that you could actually discover and interact with. You crossed the ocean and used precious supplies to travel across the continent. You visited native villages and hoped for good trade opportunities. And you eagerly made trips home to cash in on your success. In a way, it was the prototypical trip to Ironforge: you collected your loot on the frontier, and went back to level up.

Ever since someone discovered that you could turn a physics assignment into a game by pretending the goal was to land an asterisk on the surface of the moon using arrow keys, gaming advocates have claimed that games make you smarter, or at least teach you something, even if it doesn't help you out in any practical way. Ironically, as games have become more interesting to mainstream audiences, designers have become somewhat more circumspect in what they're actually teaching. In *Seven Cities of Gold*, you could raze Indian settlements in keeping with the educational theory of factual representation. In *Age of Empires III*, Indians are allied with Mother Nature and their settlements (although not their warriors) are indestructible. While that

absolves strategy gamers of any sticky moral choices, I'm pretty sure games about WWII still let the Germans invade Poland.

Sid Meier's Pirates! was released in 1987, and while its genius was its own, I can't help but think that with its expansive world and sense of exploration, *Seven Cities of Gold* figured in some way into the design. Meier all but admits it. "It opened our eyes to the tremendous possibilities for computer games," he said when I asked him how *Seven Cities* influenced his games. "Dani Bunten helped us to see that a well made game can place a whole world inside your computer that's just waiting to be explored." Which is pretty much exactly what *Seven Cities of Gold* was all about.

And which, sadly, is one of the things this genre has lost. When playing *Seven Cities of Gold*, you really did explore the

world. You even needed to watch the map carefully to spot the flashing icon that indicated a native city—today that would be considered a cheap interface trick. But because the decisions were so limited, you could actually focus on what was going on around you. Gauging how many supplies it would take you to make it back to the ships was somehow far more nerve-wracking than any single game mechanic you'll find today because it forced you to focus on the environment in a way that's impossible in modern games. It's hard to think of a contemporary strategy game that's simultaneously visceral and contemplative, yet the limitations of computer hardware in 1984 allowed *Seven Cities of Gold* to be both.



"Any game you played as a kid has to be better than anything available today, because that's one of the laws of gaming."

No one wants games to go back to being in two colors, or asterisk-landing exercises, or missing persons drills to locate Carmen Sandiego. However, as strategy games have become more complex, some of the sense of wonder has disappeared. The world looks much more real, but there is much less sense of place. Maybe that has to do with the part of the game you personalize by creating it in your head. Back then, this is what made you a dork.

Guess what? It still does. ■

technicalities

by Kevin Rice

Tap Into the Past

GameTap's unique mix of old school and new technology hits all the right notes

Back in the early '80s, when I was just a budding 12-year-old dork, I had a favorite game on my Atari 2600. It was an Activision title called *MegaMania*. With a lot of practice and a little luck, I managed to beat the game. (Bonus points for those that know how many levels it has.) I gloated to my brother and sister about my high score and how they couldn't beat it. And then someone turned off the console and it was all lost.

Now, 23-years later, GameTap lets me relive the glory days where no mall was complete without an arcade and high scores ruled the pizza place. Its unique mix of games—both retro and very recent—along with a proprietary interface and online high-score tracking, makes it a legitimized version of *MAME*. While nearly everyone in-



"You can still use LimeWire or any other number of peer-to-peer sharing programs to get your retro fix, but GameTap is perfect for those of us with a conscience."

terested in old games can download *MAME* and find arcade game ROMs, getting them involves playing the arcade game "Click to Close 40 Porn Pop-ups." After you "win," there's a chance the ROM isn't even functional. And if that's not bad enough, this is all of dubious legality.

To understand GameTap a little better, I talked with Ricardo Sanchez, the V.P. of Content, and Eric Diez, the V.P. of Technology. With 11 emulators for everything from the Atari 2600 to the Dreamcast, and even recent Windows titles like *Vietcong* and *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* (which run natively with no emulation), this relatively small product packs a lot of punch. The thought of downloading some of these huge games is daunting; 1GB or more takes a long time, regardless of your broadband speed.

What GameTap does is download what you need to get started playing in minutes—seconds for the retro stuff—

and while you're playing, it continues to download the rest of the game in the background. This is all cached on your hard drive, in encrypted form, so the next time you play the game it's already there. You control the size of the cache as well, so the application won't eat your entire drive. If you don't play a game for a while and the application needs more space, it swaps them in and out accordingly.

GameTap gives you access to hundreds of games from plenty of different systems for a flat monthly fee. It legitimizes the process of downloading and playing games similarly to what the re-launched Napster (and in a slightly different way, iTunes) did for music. You can still use LimeWire or any other number of peer-to-peer sharing programs to get your retro fix, but GameTap is perfect for those of us with a conscience. And you don't need four system selectors, two-dozen controllers, storage space for boxes, and your parent's basement.

In addition to the games, there's also a budding MediaPlex that showcases short movies, provides game tips, and more. For those concerned about the content of the games, there are parental controls, and the application automatically identifies any USB controllers you may have attached to your machine, allowing you to customize your playing experience.

The emulators themselves are tweaked by the original game publishers, so the experience is as close to the original as possible. While emulating an Atari 2600 is hardly a feat, a Dreamcast is slightly more complex. They've managed to keep the system specs relatively low: the minimum spec is an 800MHz processor, 256MB of RAM, and a 32MB videocard. With the more recent PC games, you'll want something a little beefier.

While I realize that this practically reads like ad copy for GameTap, this is some interesting technology. The streaming downloads, the small footprint, the high score tracking, and the ability to seamlessly switch from an Atari 2600 to a Commodore 64 to a Sega Genesis to a Windows game in the same 20-minute session is extremely impressive. Even better, for the cost of one MMO, you have access to hundreds of games, with an average of 5-6 new titles added every week. And you know what? The original publishers are compensated for their work. It's guilt-free. It's low-carb retro. And it's current Windows games, all rolled into one.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go maintain my all-time high score on *MegaMania*. It's good to be number one again, and this time I have the proof. ■

Sound Investment

For serious gamers, the **Steel Sound 5H headphones** are worth the extra cost

★★★★½ **Manufacturer Steel Sound MSRP \$129**

Lesser headphones come with a mute switch on the cord. Some even have a volume knob. The Steel Sound 5H headphones, on the other hand, have both.

And that, in a nutshell, is what makes these headphones superior. If you expect a feature in a set of headphones, it's included with the Steel Sound 5H. The cord is sectioned, with a three-foot length for laptops on airplanes and a six-foot extension to drape behind your computer. Both pieces adapt easily to the included converter, which takes the standard 1/8-inch headphone and microphone jacks and converts them to USB.

The included microphone is retractable into the left earpiece and of very high quality—it doesn't sound like you're chewing on it when communicating during a firefight. It doesn't have to be right in front of your mouth, but it also won't pick up all the ambient background noise.

Of course, any gaming headset needs to be rated for sound quality, and these don't disappoint. The bass is rich and deep, the highs aren't piercing, and the mid-range mixes beautifully.

All of this comes at a fairly substantial price, but if you frequently use headphones, you'd be hard-pressed to do better than the Steel Sound 5H. They're the Lexus of gaming headphones. —Kevin Rice



600SLI Power Supply **SinTek**/\$189 ★★★★★½

Who needs 600 watts of power? Not many people, that's for sure. But for those with systems featuring multiple videocards, hard drives, DVDs, and ultra-fast CPUs, you can't really have too much power, even if most of it is wasted. SinTek's 600SLI is overkill for all but the most serious system builders, but there's little doubt it's a top-notch power supply. It has modular cables, a built-in

temperature LCD, a knob that controls the fan speeds (it goes from quiet to annoying), and, most impressively, adjustable voltages for overlocking. A 500-watt model is a more reasonable choice for most people, but both models deliver the power goods and look pretty cool while doing it. —Steve Bauman



Data Traveler **Kingston**/\$80-\$400 1GB ★★★★★½ 4GB ★★★★★

Back when wearing a USB pen drive around your neck was chic—that five-minute period, at least—a low-capacity, non-USB 2.0 drive was \$100. Now, they're common and inexpensive. Kingston's latest Data Travelers are the perfect companion for the busy person with a ton of data on the go. The company offers 1GB and 4GB versions, and both include data synchronization and security software. The drives are fast, but neither includes a lanyard. On the 4GB model, the holes are so small that it will take a flimsy piece of jewelry—or even just plain string—to attach it to a necklace. However, the drives are small enough for your pocket and perform as promised. And, like a mouse wheel, USB pen drives are something you don't realize you need until you have it. —Kevin Rice



ROLL YOUR OWN

If you're looking to build your own machine, or are in the market for a new one, you're faced with an overwhelming number of choices. This monthly guide gives you some basic starting information on the most critical components of any gaming system: processor and video.

Processor

Intel and AMD are slowly but surely releasing a new stream of chips. As usual, they are tough to come by and priced at a hefty premium. You don't need these monsters to play the latest and greatest games. A little simple shopping will yield some impressive values that will keep you up to speed.

Budget

Athlon 64 3200+/3.0GHz Pentium 4

Make sure to get the 800MHz FSB version of the Pentium, or the 939-pin Athlon (for upgrading purposes). Both chips are bargains at this price. \$180

Sweet Spot

Athlon 64 3500+

Again, go with the 939-pin version of the Athlon. This chip isn't significantly faster than the "budget" chips, but that extra oomph comes for only \$50 or so. \$250

Ultimate

Athlon FX-57

The flagship of the AMD consumer processors is the best a gamer can do; at least until dual-core CPUs match single-core ones in performance. \$1000

Video

There's a new performance champ in town, and it's crazy expensive. But if you need the ultimate, there's one choice.

Budget

GeForce 6600 GT

This is easily the best bang-for-your buck card on the market today. It's not worth considering anything slower or cheaper. \$150

Sweet Spot

GeForce 6800 GT/Radeon X800 XL

One of the great benefits to new, high-end cards is the subsequent drop in price of previous generation ones. \$260

Ultimate

GeForce 7800GTX

If you want the absolute fastest card in existence, this is it. For now, ATI's new line will likely provide a solid alternative when available in quantity. \$480

G-Whiz

Logitech delivers two more winning peripherals in the form of the **G7 Laser Cordless Mouse** and **G15 Keyboard**

Manufacturer Logitech MSRP G7: \$99; G15: \$79

Shortly after Microsoft brought out its newest line of keyboard and mouse peripherals, Logitech launched another winning salvo with its new G-series devices. The first out of the gate was the superlative G5 Laser Mouse, and now it's time for a wireless version of that mouse and a "gamer" keyboard.

Though its mouse line has gotten plenty of (deserved) acclaim, Logitech hasn't made a decent keyboard in quite a while. Most of its models are overloaded with way too many useless keys—one has a "Shopping" key, for crying out loud—but the **G15 Keyboard** (★★★★) is designed for gamers. It's no less bloated, in terms of size and number of extra keys. It's three to four inches bigger than your average multimedia keyboard, but that extra space is devoted to 18 extra programmable function keys, all of which have three different alternate settings (yes, that means you can map an absurd 54 functions to those keys; knock yourself out). It has two USB ports and a switch for turning off the Windows key (thank God) and features blue backlit keys that make it the best keyboard possible for playing in darkened rooms. It's built solidly, and the edges and wrist pad use the same high-quality textured rubbery surface as the previous-generation Logitech mouse.

The keyboard's biggest feature—both figuratively and literally—is the flip-up LCD in the middle. It uncovers media control keys and a volume knob, but the LCD itself

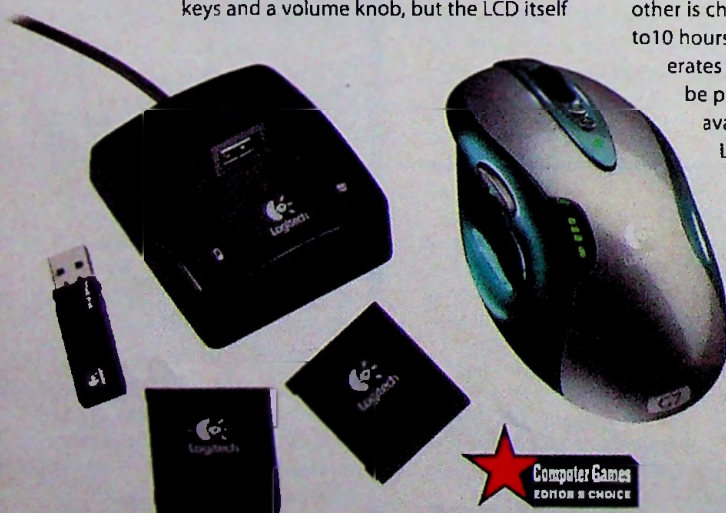
can display information from games, a clock, or how many resources your system is consuming. It's gimmicky—why do you want to look at your keyboard to see how much health you have when it's on screen right in front of you?—but not completely useless. You need to know what song is playing, or how much RAM your game is using, right?

While the typing action is solid, one of the concessions to keeping the size of the keyboard down is that each key is smaller than normal. Having extra keys on the left of your keyboard also takes some getting used to—you end up hitting the additional function keys when you mean to hit Esc—but eventually you get accustomed to it.

And what can you say about the **G7 Laser Cordless Mouse** (★★★★½) that hasn't already been said about the G5 Laser? Like its corded cousin, it's a spectacular pointing device. Its only downside is its cost. It includes two lightweight rechargeable lithium-ion batteries. While one is in use, the other is charging in the transmitter. It takes anywhere from 2 to 10 hours to fully charge the spare battery. The transmitter operates at 2.4GHz, with 24 separate channels, and can either be plugged into the charging station or directly into an available USB port. Unlike the previous wireless Logitech mouse, the MX700, the G7 charger doesn't need to be plugged into an outlet.

The action is superb, with no lag and on-the-fly DPI and sensitivity adjustments—there's even a battery display on the mouse itself, and swapping them out only takes a few seconds. The G7 is lighter than the MX700, but just as comfortable.

Unlike Microsoft, which recently released its own underwhelming "gamer" mouse, Logitech can do no wrong. The G15 may have a few too many extra keys, but it's a terrific keyboard for any gamer. As for the G7, it's merely the best wireless mouse on the planet. —Steve Bauman



The New Standard in Control

The excellent **Xbox 360 Controller for Windows** will hopefully be the end of gamepad configuration

★★★★½ Manufacturer Microsoft MSRP \$39.99

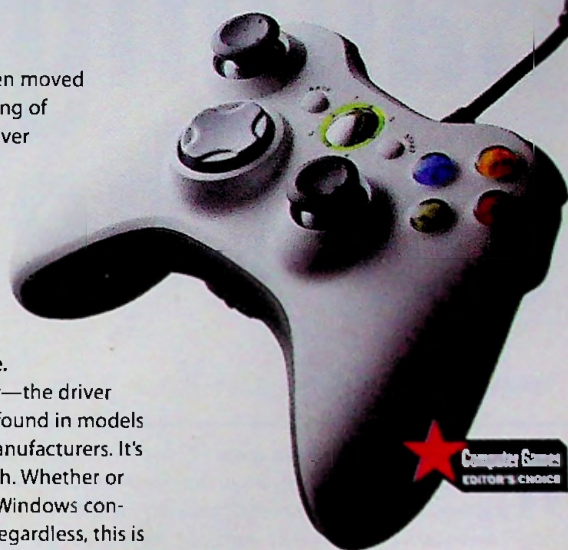
Getting a gamepad working on a PC isn't a challenge; configuring your pad for every single game is. So, the upside about Microsoft creating a Windows driver for its Xbox 360 controller—and releasing it as a standalone “Xbox 360 Controller for Windows”—is that it will likely become the standard for PC gamepads. Every game will default to its layout, meaning you won't need to spend the first 20-minutes of any game tweaking the controls.

A person can dream, at least.

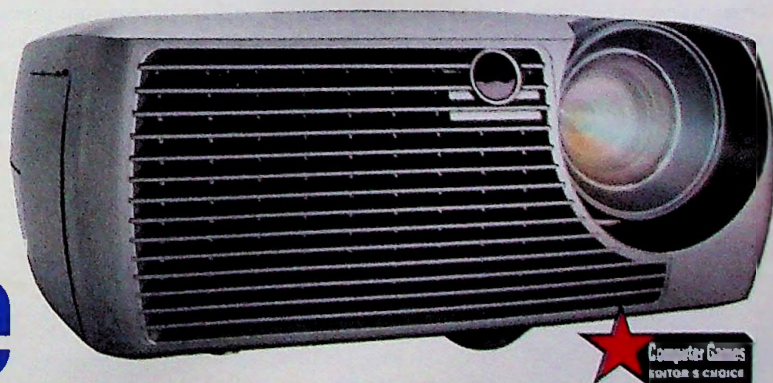
Unlike the oft-criticized Xbox controller, it's the right size for both people with wee- and giant man-hands. It has good button action, both in the four on the face and the two analog triggers on the back. The white

and black buttons have been moved to the center, next to the “ring of light.” The biggest change over the Xbox layout is that two of the buttons formerly on the front have moved to the back of the unit, making it even closer to the PS2 layout. It also has rumble effects and a 9-foot breakaway USB cable.

Its only negative is minor—the driver lacks the profiling features found in models from Logitech and other manufacturers. It's not a huge omission, though. Whether or not it becomes the default Windows controller remains to be seen; regardless, this is one terrific gamepad. —SB



Wall of Game



The **InFocus X3** is a solid and inexpensive choice for big-screen gaming ★★★★★½ Manufacturer InFocus MSRP \$1,099

It's absurd to play a game on a 100-inch screen. Gloriously absurd. The X3 projector from InFocus lets you do this with amazing clarity, at very high resolutions. It has impressive specs: 1700 lumens and a 2000:1 contrast ratio. That basically means it's very bright, and very dark.

In other words, it makes your games look amazing, and huge. It's a decently sized unit, and at just under seven pounds, it's somewhat portable. With a bit of adjust-

ment, the color is superb. There's enough contrast to keep blacks from being murky (it's arguably better than most LCDs), but more impressive is the picture itself. It's incredibly clear; if you fear the jaggy, wait until you see them at this size. Text on both the Windows desktop and in games is sharp and easy to read.

It supports resolutions up to 1400x1050, so it works in both regular aspect and widescreen. It has VGA, RGB, and composite

video inputs, and can produce a 100-inch screen from 12-15 feet, though it starts to lose some focus at that size. Perhaps its best new feature is its longer lamp life—InFocus claims it will last 4000 hours, which is double the standard for most projectors (including previous InFocus models tested).

The reasonably priced X3 is a terrific choice for anyone looking for some big-screen screen gaming. Make that really, really big screen gaming. —SB

Gaming on the Cheap



Worried about the costs of upgrading? Here are five tips for saving money on your next PC purchase

When building or buying a game PC, you're always balancing your budget and the performance of its components. If you have a few thousand dollars burning a hole in your pocket, it's easy: buy a high-end system. But for most people, that's not an option. You're either trying to eke more out of our existing system or build something that won't put you in debt for the next five years.

Making matters even more complicated, it might also be nice if the machine remains a decent performer for more than an hour after you slap the pieces together. And it hopefully has some sort of upgrade path for down the road. And you want it to look cool. And it might be nice if it didn't sound like a wind tunnel.

Requirements like those present an interesting challenge. If value is your primary concern, moderate your expectations. Don't complain when your \$700 system can't run a game as well as a \$3000 one, and you can't really expect a \$150 videocard to perform like a \$500 one. That's like complaining games for the \$150 Xbox you bought today don't look as good as the ones you can get for the \$400 Xbox 360.

So, with that in mind, here are five general tips to consider before hitting that "Buy" button at your favorite online hardware store.



1 Let Your Monitor Show the Way

Everyone loves LCD displays. They look cool, and the pictures are fantastic. Their emergence as the display of choice for gamers has had a serious impact on how you should view the performance of your system. While you can always go for raw speed, now you

should target a system that gives you the best graphics possible at the native resolution of your LCD.

2 Mid-range is Probably Enough

With that in mind, anyone with a 19-inch LCD model (or lower) should only worry about videocards that can handle a maximum resolution

of 1280x1024. Less expensive mid-range ones can handle most games without a lot of trouble, assuming you don't have an irrational fear of jaggies. If you want anti-aliasing in every game, you

might need to move up in class; however, a \$500 7800GTX or X1800XT is largely a waste of horsepower and money at that resolution.

It's hell buying videocards. It's a pea soup of acronyms. It's generally true that the more you spend, the better the performance. One smart tip: last year's high-end card is often this year's mid-range one.



3

Don't Overspend on a CPU

The old adage used to be, "Get as fast a CPU as you can afford." Today, it's more like, "Get a decent CPU, but apply the savings to your videocard." A 200-300MHz difference in CPU speeds can cost you \$200-\$300, and unless you have a meaty videocard or a desire to run at higher resolutions the extra processing power will likely be wasted.

As of right now, dual core is a luxury item; until the prices go down, stick with single-core.



4

Athlons for Upgraders

AMD vs. Intel. There are a lot of inexpensive Intel systems out there, but AMD systems offer better performance at a lower cost. If you're rolling your own, you also have to take into account Intel's unfortunate habit of redesigning its motherboards, meaning it's harder to upgrade a CPU down the road.

So if you can get a socket 939 Athlon system, there's a chance you can get a faster CPU down the road. You could save money buying a 3000+ today; down the road, you could upgrade to a 4000+, FX-57, or even a dual core CPU.

5

Don't Go Cheap on Your Mouse or Keyboard

If you're looking to save a few bucks on your system, this is not the place for it. They're your interface with your PC, so spend the extra cash on something you really like. Besides, you can use a mouse and keyboard with multiple systems.



Cutting-edge On a Budget

The eMachines T6524 system is a terrific value; just add video and watch it run



★ ★ ★ ★ 1/2

Manufacturer eMachines MSRP \$599 (plus \$150 for a videocard)

Our "Roll Your Own" recommendation for a low-end gaming system is one with an Athlon 3500+, 1GB of RAM, and an NVIDIA 6600GT videocard. eMachines offers a system that almost matches those specs, the T6524, and it's a seriously good value. Just try building a similar system for this little cash; it's nearly impossible.

There's one enormous caveat: you need to replace the on-board video. The included ATI Radeon 2000 on-board video is fully functional, but it's somewhere beyond slow. But unlike most budget systems from Dell and their ilk, the T6524 has an empty PCI Express slot on its MSI motherboard.

So, if you replace the videocard, this suddenly becomes a terrific gaming system. For our testing, we used a 6600GT, which currently goes for about \$150. For \$750, you're looking at a system that can run with systems costing nearly twice as much. (Its 3D Mark and F.E.A.R. performance matched or exceeded systems ranging from a 2.5GHz-3.2GHz Pentium 4s, and even a faster Athlon FX-57, with the same videocard.)

Though it's loaded up with useless software that should quickly be uninstalled, it's hard to imagine a system with these specs at this price. Most budget systems come with less RAM, smaller hard drives, and one optical drive. Though this isn't going to dazzle your friends at the local LAN party, this is a good-looking budget system with fantastic performance for its price. —SB

The Specs AMD Athlon 64 3500+ CPU; 1GB RAM; ATI Radeon 2000 Express video; 200GB hard drive; 16X DVD-RW; 48X CD-ROM; 8-in-1 Media Reader; AC '97 Sound; Ethernet; Windows XP Media Center Edition; Microsoft Works 8.0; Modem, mouse, keyboard, speakers; 7 USB 2.0 and 2 IEEE 1394 ports

BENCHMARKS

PC Mark 2005

Overall	3416
CPU	3119
Memory	4003
Graphics	3573
HDD	4537

3D Mark 2005

1024x768	3642
1280x1024	2865

FEAR

1024x768	42
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All tests run without anti-aliasing. FEAR was run with medium texture detail, no AA, no soft shadows, and everything else set at maximum.

However, there are bargains to be had. While you can go nuts with a Logitech G15 keyboard or any number of elaborate multimedia models, many gamers prefer older, simpler keyboards, or even the inexpensive \$25 models. As for your mouse, don't be fooled into thinking that you

need an über-one. A standard optical mouse is fine for all but the hardest of the hardcore. If you're looking at Logitech vs. Microsoft vs. Razer, it's all about personal preference and comfort. Take one for a test drive to see what best fits your hand.

—Steve Bauman

road to nowhere

by Cindy Yans

Tough Sell

To market, to market, but probably not

One of the things that I never get tired of wondering about is just how so many MMOs, in these days of multimillion-dollar production costs, stick around in alpha or beta for so long before being released into certain obscurity or fading away entirely. Frequently I stroll through the land of "What-the-Hell-Is-That-MMO?" looking for signs of life. Usually I navigate to a hitherto unknown game's homepage, try to figure out what its "deal" is, and, more often than not, crash into a link proclaiming, "Coming Soon."

I suspect the folks behind these games want you to think that "coming soon" means there are legions of dedicated people busily assembling the information necessary to pump life into that empty link. In most cases, though, it's probably just an underfunded, over-budget, understaffed, overambitious group of (more or

less) grassroots designers, in the midst of a debut project. They're fighting for the game's very existence—for which you really have to hand it to them.

In my last trek through Coming Soon Land, I found dozens of projects

fight against each other individually and/or in groups; players want to experience a fun game and look cool right from the start; players want to influence the world and make a difference." Hardly revolutionary, but check it out at (guess where?) thechroniclesofspellborn.com.

Ballerium (ballerium.com), on the other hand, has actually had a bit of buzz. It's been in beta since 2003 and has been a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't staple that pokes its head out of the ground every so often. *Ballerium's* shtick is that it's an MMORTS, a blend of persistent world gameplay in a real-time strategy setting—a good idea, actually, as there aren't a whole lot of them around. In development for over four years by Majorem, an Israeli company that started operating under the auspices of the Am-Shav technological applied development center, it has a core of devoted supporters and has had a few bits of bad luck. Like this one found on Majorem's website: "December 23, 2004—A new agreement revealed today is a publishing deal signed with Interplay...." Ouch.

Twilight War: After the Fall (twilightwar.com) got tired of calling itself an MMOFPSRPG, so it took on the moniker "XORG." Founded by former executives and staff from America Online/Time Warner, L3 Communications, Link Simulation and Training, and Gorilla Systems Corporation, Gator Games has produced a hybrid that takes place in a postapocalyptic world in the year 2296, 200 years after the Doomsday War between mankind and alien invaders rendered much of the Earth uninhabitable and destroyed human civilization. Okay, its concept is a yawner, but the title itself is pretty respectable looking nonetheless, and a welcome entry in an underpopulated genre.

Korea's IMC Games is incubating *Grenada Espada*, a breathtakingly gorgeous title with art assets that'll absolutely slay you (really). Its core concept is not all that easy to glean, since the English website needs a serious retranslation. Not a refreshing wine spritzer as its name suggests, *Grenada Espada* refers to a continent that was discovered by two guys named Granada and... Espada. One of the qualities the developer heralds as unique is "New Fellows," a mechanic whereby you can recruit NPCs. The website completely elucidates this concept: "The player can have similar class with basic three classes but have different capabilities, or they will be unknown new classes." You'll smile if you browse through ge.hanbiton.com/en/index.htm. When I Googled *Grenada Espada*, the first link I encountered was labeled, "Why Do Korean Games Suck?" It leads to a forum at onrpg.com that contains some of the best-stated, most analytical posts ever, like: "dont play korean games are not the games that suck its you that suck. i aint joking. =D maplestory dont suck. mabinogi dont suck digimon rpg dont suck theeres alot of more..." He can say that again.

In a climate where titles like *UXO*, *Mythica*, and *Imperator* have died on the vine, can any of these survive? There's a lot of blind hope out there, but also a lot of pluck and talent. Some of these will have to succeed. Right? Right? Bueller? ■



"In a climate where titles like *UXO*, *Mythica*, and *Imperator* have died on the vine, can any of these survive?"

about which I had either not heard or knew very little. Some are actually pretty compelling for one reason or another. Just after getting a beta application for Sigil Games' *Vanguard*, I got another for something called *The Chronicles of Spellborn* (on which I am probably still sitting). Developed by Dutch game studio Khaeon Games, *Spellborn* is a real looker set in the Enclave of the Five Sacrifices, a collection of rock realms drifting through the DeadSpell Storm, which, in turn, is a collection of inhabited shards of rock that float through a breathable void that boils with elder power. Okay. The game uses the Unreal 2.5 engine and has a F.A.Q. with an unbroken link.

What makes *The Chronicles of Spellborn* different? The developer says it's that the game is based on three simple design principles: "Players want to Interact with each other or

Raising the Bar

Annual State of Play con has attorneys playing for keeps

At tending State of Play is a little like going to a heavy metal concert and finding that your section of the arena is populated entirely by members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Then, while you're standing there with a confused look on your face trying to figure out what the hell is going on, the band comes on stage and the choir starts rocking out. And they know all the lyrics.

Now replace heavy metal and Mormons with online gaming and lawyers, and you have State of Play. Hosted by New York Law School, in collaboration with Yale and Harvard, it's in its third year of bringing legal academics, practicing members of the legal community, and online game designers together to discuss issues of law and society in virtual worlds. For outsiders, it's hard not to be somewhat tickled initially by the underlying silliness of it all: a roomful of people with enough degrees to wallpaper the moon twice, talking about, among other things, ganking, ninja-looting, and Chinese gold farmers. But when you see that these people are tackling real issues and taking the gaming industry seriously, you start to realize something pretty amazing is taking place.

"State of Play 1 was us getting on the same page, getting used to having lawyers and game designers in the same room and not being allergic to one another," explained Beth Noveck, a member of the NYLS faculty and conference director for State of Play, during her opening remarks on this year's event. "Year two we began to identify the problems and to ask the questions, and this year I think for the first time we're beginning to focus on solutions."

Following that directive, much of this year's conversation focused on issues that have been building over the last year and their potential tangible, long-term effects. Pending cases, such as Marvel's copyright infringement suit against

NCsoft and its *City of Heroes* game, got bounced around considerably by the various panels. Other discourse focused on more sociological elements, and on how virtual worlds could potentially be used to model and teach crisis scenarios.

There was also a great deal of time given to the discussion of a recent decision by the Supreme Court to classify broadband technology as an "information service" rather than a "telecommunication service."

"This is a big moment in the history of the Internet," said Susan Crawford, an assistant professor of law at Cardozo Law School, speaking on the topic. The decision could give broadband providers the ability to deny access to certain people and certain networks, or even to certain online games, and has triggered a great deal of debate in Washington about the future of telecommunication legislation.

Ultimately, at the end of the conference much of the discussion was left unfinished. There's just too much to discuss—which laws will be made, and, in an increasingly global market, whose laws will be used—and too little time to do it. So all the participants part ways for another year, no doubt to continue their debates in virtual spaces until next year's conference brings them together again in the flesh. —Adam Fleet



Always entertaining, MUD creator Dr. Richard Bartle hams it up for the webcast.

Photo © Jack McIntyre of New York Law School

Hot Furnace

Guild Wars update spews content galore

Guild Wars' latest update, *Sorrow's Furnace*, provides new monsters, new quests, new items, new collectors, new weapons, and more to fans of the "no monthly fee" MMO. The addition is designed to appeal to Ascended characters (meaning characters above Level 20) with the new content geared mostly toward those play-

ers. The download is free, so you need only to log into Guild Wars to access it via ArenaNet's nearly transparent "content creation on the fly" method.

Sorrow's Furnace is a depleted mine carved into the depths of the Shiverpeak Mountains, filled with many monsters and the source of rich rewards. In addition to new unique collectible items, there will be three new collectors in the Fire Island Chain, offering XP-enhancing scrolls in exchange for certain items. —Cindy Yans



From Disney to Dodson

Adult-themed MMO targets women

In September, newly formed Republik Games announced its debut product, *Spend the Night*, which is an adult-only title that invites participants to bring their sexual exploits online. Former Disney employee Glennis McClellan, who was responsible for Disney's Buena Vista Division's girl-targeted titles, says "I am excited by the opportunity to create smart, fun products for women. There's a myth that women aren't interested in erotic content, which is totally untrue. Women are just as interested in sex as men are but there is little in the way of online content for this vast market. We plan to get women involved, put in features they care about, and make our game both entertaining and accessible."

Unlike other "dating games," in which the goal is to win over someone of the preferred gender, *Spend the Night* allows you to create an avatar, and socialize online until you find someone you're attracted to. When

your interaction has been intimate enough to cause onlookers to shout, "Get a room!" (or the like), you do have the opportunity to, well, get a room. With graphics described as "cinematic," you use the game's controls to act out your erotic fantasy, or whatever other activities arise. CEO Robert Coshland says, "There is little to nothing with erotic content, that has been developed specifically targeted to women either in the game industry or in the adult industry. For whatever reason, women tend to be written off as people who have no interest in sexual content. We don't believe that to

be true." McClellan agrees. "Women are much more interested in community, relationships and erotic content than the violence that is so pervasive in today's video games," she says. "After all, everyone has sex—but thankfully, not everyone goes on a killing spree." —CY



The randy management team of Republik Games

MOBS & FRIENDS



Bring out your dead. The *World of Warcraft* guild Cult of Ythrl staged an event on one of Blizzard's role-playing servers in the spirit of the game's seasonal holiday "Hallow's Eve." Everyone traded in their characters for Level 1 Undead, gave them unpronounceable names (after all, zombies don't have tongues or jaws), and wandered over to Stormwind. Because a picture is worth a thousand brains, here you go.

MMOcabulary

Aggro Aggro is basically a measurement of how much monsters hate you.

"Getting aggro" or "holding aggro" refers to obtaining or maintaining your place at the top of an NPC's hate list. It may be acquired during melee fighting, taunting, healing, or casting.

Gimped The state of a character whose owner has made really bad choices in building it, which means it's not very good at anything—or at least not nearly as good as it should or could have been. Of course, this might also result from having been...

Nerfed When the development team decides that your character's class is too powerful, they often, in the interest of game balance, take away, lessen the effectiveness of, or generally weaken one or more of your traits, skills, or spells. When this happens, your character is said to have been "nerfed." (Okay, you can blame nerfing on the dev team, but gimping is your own fault, dummy.)

Spec or Build Describes the way you have allocated your experience points or how you have chosen a particular set of skills.

MMOBYTES



And the Pulitzer Prize for Literature...— ... goes to the *City of Heroes* novel, *Web of Arachnos*. Late 2005 saw the release of this first novel based on the game, which tells the story of Paragon City's iconic hero Statesman, and his

arch-nemesis, Lord

Recluse, the leader of Arachnos.... Dark Age OK—The Camelot Herald's "Come to our town" contest ended, and the lucky winner was Oklahoma City, OK. On January 20, 2006

anyone in the city will be

able to meet Mythic developers, laud them, and be ultimately swagged with T-shirts, prizes, and more....

Second Life and Your Tax Dollars—A project funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security is part of the core research program of the Emergency Readiness and Response Research Center at Dartmouth College's Institute for Security Technology Studies.

Researcher Satchmo Prototype gave a presentation on the use of *Second Life* as a platform for creating synthetic environments for Homeland Security.... **New Pals**—In an unprecedented move *Dofus* has announced that it is now accepting PayPal for subscription payments via its website.

Voices from Within

Vivox seeks to embed voice IP in MMOs

Embedded communication services provider Vivox is looking to provide serious competition to popular online game chat applications such as Roger Wilco and TeamSpeak. Vivox is working with online gaming service providers to embed application-specific communication services into their MMOs. Company chairman Jeff Pulver, who was heavily involved in the development of what became *Vonage*, says, "Replacing traditional phone service has been done. Now, it's time to utilize the real power of IP communications by providing organizations with capabilities that they can customize for any application in any environment."



With communications directly available in-game, independent-server-driven applications like TeamSpeak and Wilco could become superfluous. Vivox proposes this scenario: "Joe Gamer fires up his fantasy MMO.

As his presence is automatically made known to his guild mates, he is invited to a live voice chat sponsored by his guild. A pop-up window alerts Joe to who else is engaged in the chat." From here, the same capabilities that exist in outside applications can be accessed from within the game,

such as the ability to "silence" unruly participants, add new players, and build guild-or group-based voice-chat. The vision is to make the technology available within your game of choice via a patch. —CY



Power to the People

The Ryzom Ring lets players create in The Saga of Ryzom BY ADAM FLEET

Developer Nevrax Publisher Nevrax Release Date February 2006

Giving players the tools to make their own games is a little bit like letting the lunatics run the asylum. Sure, we have a lot of crazy ideas that could "totally pwnzor d00d!!11!" but most of us are probably best left to the relative safety of our strait-jackets and padded cells. If the Internet has taught us anything, though, it's that hidden among the oodles of mixed nuts exist some people who are actually very talented.

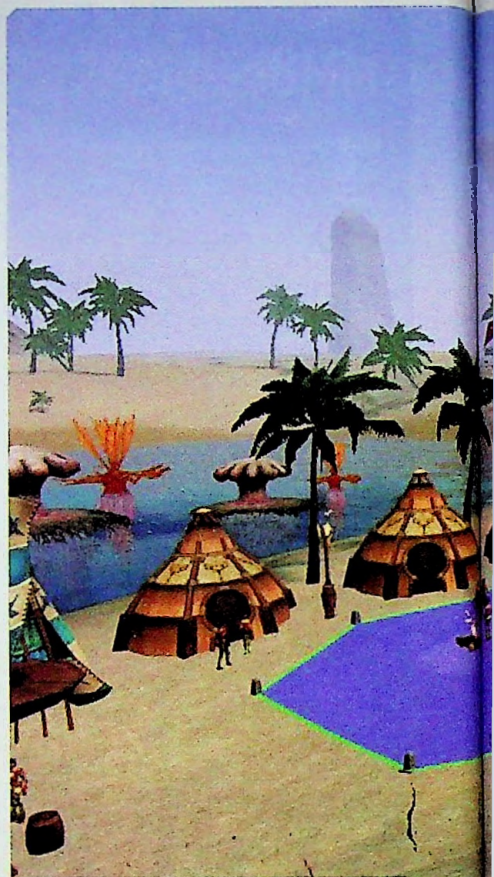
Bestowing creation powers upon the artists formerly known as the audience is exactly what French developer Nevrax is doing with *The Ryzom Ring*, the first extension to its massively multiplayer role-playing game, *The Saga of Ryzom*. Launched in 2004, the original received glowing praise for its beautifully crafted gameworld but was slammed with harsh criticism for its unfriendly newbie experience and sometimes brutally punishing gameplay (read as: frequent maulings by roving packs of vicious animals). It managed to find a niche as a rich role-playing environment for those with the intestinal fortitude to overlook its faults. Now into its second year, Nevrax is expanding its science-fantasy realm with Episode 2 of the story and *The Ryzom Ring* extension, both as free downloads to all of the game's subscribers.

With access to world building tools similar to those available in Bioware's *Neverwinter Nights*, "anyone will be able to set up an adventure that's basically a sandbox," explains Jessica Mulligan, *The Saga of Ryzom*'s executive producer, on what *The*

Ryzom Ring's launch will bring. Using a beta version of the tools, creating simple adventures by dropping monsters, structures, and NPCs was child's play. Even the next level of complexity up—setting patrol routes for groups of enemies, dialogues for NPCs, and simple scripts to control the sequence of events—was easy enough to do with just a bit of mucking about, though there's still a fair amount of refinement that needs to happen before the tools are ready to go live.

"If they just want to take our library assets and do their own cool little adventures, or even cool big adventures, that's exactly why we're doing this," says Mulligan. Want to test your friends with wave upon wave of monsters? Easy. Set up an Initiation mission for prospective guild members? Done. Build a lakeside cabana for you and your friends to kick back after a long day's hacking and slashing? Bottom's up!

Unlike *Neverwinter Nights*, however, *Ryzom* is a massive persistent world, and putting this kind of power in the hands of the players could easily become game breaking without a system of controls. "If we



allowed players to get loot and experience in these scenarios we would obviously be creating a farming and exploiting haven, so we can't allow it," explains Daniel Miller, *The Ryzom Ring*'s executive producer. What will be allowed is for dungeon masters to go as Santa Claus as they want with anything their characters have on them. Since they'd be able to do that in the game anyway, it permits them to safely give away any of their own personal swag to the participants



With just a few clicks of your Ryzom Ring tools you can have a nice little encampment, or get more complicated with zones, groups, patrols, and scripting.

of their adventures without throwing the greater balance out of whack.

Eventually, those who show a proficiency for creating grade-A adventures will be able to join what Nevra is calling the Pioneers. Those who are approved as Pioneers will be empowered to create adventures with the same risks and rewards as normal game areas, as well as Outlands that can become permanent fixtures of the gameworld itself.

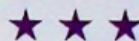
"It's like passing a driver's test," explains Miller. "You just need to know the basics before you get started. You get to stay a Pioneer indefinitely as long as you abide by our basic rules, which are to respect the players whom you're playing with, to

respect the universe, and to not try to create exploits." The penalty for breaking that trust will be a swift boot out of the Pioneers, restricting creation privileges to only private sandbox areas from then on.

The Ryzom Ring comes fast on the heels of *The Saga of Ryzom's* second story episode, which introduces factional conflict between the forces of magic and technology. New outposts, which control new unique crafting resources, are intended to give meaning to PvP combat. Also included in Episode 2 are an introductory cinematic and a complete revamp of the new player area in the hopes of more gracefully welcoming potential paying customers into the game. ■

Dofus

The Tofu Egg and Jik



Genre Turn-based Flash-animated French MMO
Developer/Publisher Ankama Studios
ESRB Not Rated Requirements Flash Plug-in

Set entirely in Flash-animated snapshots graced by architecture, characters, forests, and oceans that look lifted right from Miyazaki doodles, the French MMO *Dofus* offers most, if not all, of the same activity choices as its glossier brethren, all for the comparatively modest \$6.90 per month. (You can also just wander around indefinitely and enjoy inquiries from other players along the lines of "Me got bread for tofu o smell?" or "Cimmik dinnik Mik Lirvik ii chimpigik?" for free.)

Dofus lets you choose from among 11 character classes with names like lop (a tank), Sram (an assassin), and Cra (a ranger) that generally prove to be anagrams associated with the class's abilities. For instance, the treasure-hunting class "Enutrof" translates into "fortune," while a summoner type called "Osamoda" becomes "sado-maso," since summoning, um, involves whips and black leather Speedos.

As in most MMOs, you have attributes both obvious and so arcane-sounding as to arouse suspicion, bank slots for which you pay extra, inventory items you're constantly reorganizing, factional pendulums between which to decide arbitrarily, and steadily accumulated experience points for killing particle routines with strange names at ever-declining return rates. You can also have up to three side professions, ranging from fishing, to alchemy, to butchery, fishmongery, jewelcrafting, and shoemaking (presumably because "cobbling" sounds dirty). Various other cherished MMO tropes make their rounds, from player guilds and warp gates to marriage by non-denominational NPC priests, pet cats that boost your hit points, flower picking, and epic armor sets with names like Wabbit, Toady, and Young Adventurer. As of yet, there's nothing along the lines of owning property or mounts, although getting around is pretty brisk already: you just "zone" from plaque to plaque via small mandala-shaped teleporter

pads located discreetly at the edges of most screens.

Although there's no auction house, you can go into "merchant mode" and merrily trade acorns, bluish jelly, mush mush spines, and hemp, with each zone capable of supporting up to six aspiring vendors of boowolf tails and wiwak shovels at once. The currency of *Dofus* is called kama, often abbreviated to "K," which commonly leads to such public propositions as "I giev u 10KK 4 k-kixx kk?" There's also a library book that teaches the "Secrets of the Squirrel Language," although apparently only one squirrel in particular seems to know it. (He's called the Sight Squirrel, which might mean the rest are blind, and therefore deaf.)

The biggest drag in *Dofus* is its combat system, which feels clunkier by an order of magnitude every time you subject yourself to it. It features turn-based combat à la *Baldur's Gate*, where each player in the group uses up his or her available movement and action points. The combat seems like a novelty at first, but the repetitive pattern wears thin fast and breaks up the flow the rest of *Dofus* wears so breezily on its sleeve. The combat interface basically entails clicking on tiny flashing blue squares up to your movement allowance and staying out of reach of the monsters while lobbing damage from afar. Pretty tactical. Since the fights take so long, other players in your group tend to zoom-in for the quick kill, often blocking your way or line of sight and generally undercutting any sense of teamwork, realism, or fun.

Still, *Dofus* gives you tons of visually sumptuous acreage in which to re-experience that disappointment. Instanced dungeons, forests, lighthouses, swamps, mines, and lava are immediately accessible to explore, and helpfully enough no monsters attack unless you initiate combat. Once you're locked into a battle, though, there's no running, only "surrender," which, like losing, has you revive with decreased energy



[above] In the enchanting world of *Dofus*, buying a brand-new "cock old cape" is as simple as downloading the game and purchasing an online subscription with your credit card. [right] Fighting Dark Bakers can be almost as malnourished as sampling their pastries of doom and crematory ash. [below right] Watching other characters fish is half the fun.



at your last bind point (you don't lose experience). An in-game map-and-compass system is simple and intuitive, and lots of electrifyingly incomprehensible backstory involving a war between the two major cities of Bonta and Brakmar helps put the "serious" exposition of *World of Warcraft* into hauntingly irrelevant perspective. Ankama Studios promises more content on a regular basis, and, judging from the 80,000 volunteers who allegedly signed up to participate in *Dofus'* closed beta, they seem to have motive to follow through.

The peculiar thing about *Dofus*—and here's something you don't hear every day—is that it would probably suck if it weren't French. Just enough is lost in trans-

lation. In ham-handed American hands, its name would undoubtedly have that extra "o," when in fact *Dofus* happens to be plural for the six magic dragon eggs you're seeking that grant omnipotence. As the French are fond of putting it, why collect a dozen when you can get the omnipotence for half? —Kelly Wand

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out of the box

by Brett Todd

All Lit Up

Valve plays with lurid lighting while modders wring nifty newness out of Source

One of the most eye-opening experiences I had while playing through the cavalcade of sequels that dominated Holiday Gaming Season 2005 actually came from a tech demo. As much as I enjoyed *Age of Empires III*, *Civilization IV*, and even *Quake IV*, nothing has stuck with me as much as the *Lost Coast* level that Valve released to show off the upcoming *Aftermath* expansion pack for *Half-Life 2*.

Unfortunately, my impressions were anything but positive. There is something deeply disappointing in one of gaming's most brilliant developers devoting an entire promo level to the nifty new effect called High-Dynamic Range lighting. I'm not going to complain too much, as I'll take more *Half-Life 2* any way I can get it, but I wanted more from a company that flat-out



"Modders are doing more innovative things with the Source engine than the company that created it."

rewrote the book on game-engine physics in 2004.

That's not to say that *Lost Coast* doesn't look the part of a snazzy new demo. Some gamers seem nonplussed at HDR's extra-glossy beach sand and rocks, and the way that it mimics your eyes adjusting to changing light conditions such as that experienced when emerging from a darkened tunnel into a sunlit day. But I appreciated the newness of the feature, and the way it changed my perceptions of the world around me. I was no longer looking at my surroundings through a perfect camera, but through a relatively realistic model of how human eyes would see everything. It removed one more barrier to sustaining suspension of disbelief, and made this post-apocalyptic shoreline all the more believable.

HDR is way overdone right now, leaving too many objects blooming with an ethereal glow more apropos to Lothlorien

than City 17. You can definitely see the promise that this technology holds, though. It could be used to really manipulate gamers in all types of shooters, particularly those that rely on thrills-and-chills atmosphere like the inevitable stream of *F.E.A.R.* rip-offs that will be coming down the pike in the next couple of years. Possibilities for its use in role-playing games is absolutely tremendous. Imagine a game where, for example, a dark elf could see the world in a different way than a human or a dwarf. It will be really interesting to see how *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* utilizes HDR.

Still, is this sort of thing really worth so much hype? True, some of it is undoubtedly of the "build it up just to knock it down" sort that gamers use to express just how jaded they are with what publishers are cranking out these days. But a lot of buzz has been created by Valve itself, which seems to be touting HDR as a dramatic new advance. *Lost Coast* even goes so far as to include director's cut-style features as in-game commentary about design. This conceit practically screams self-importance from the rooftops, especially in contrast to competitors like Gearbox and Ubisoft, who released the HDR-compatible *Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood* this fall with zero fanfare.

Valve's fuss over HDR also underlines the creative blah period that the gaming industry is currently weathering. Modders are doing more innovative things with the Source engine than the company that created it. While you would expect Valve to be leading the way, the company is actually taking a backseat to productions like the Garry's Mod (known to its friends as Gmod) series from Team Garry. This physics playpen pushes the limits of Source far more than any brilliantly lighted beach, and it truly broadens the interactions that this great engine makes possible.

Most notably, Gmod is a tool where *Lost Coast* is little more than a sideshow. The former shows off the almost limitless potential of the Source engine. Just look at the examples of its use cited at the official Gmod website. People are using it to create almost everything imaginable, including MMO-like online role-playing worlds, all sorts of mini-games, and comic strips and movies. Say what you want about the Gmod's popular melon race mini-game, but I'd certainly rather see a *Half-Life 2* expansion using Team Garry's physics goofiness as its foundation than something as mundane as HDR lighting.

I can't be too hard on Valve for staying the course like everybody else, because that seems to be the quickest way to make it to the bank these days. But I still feel awfully let down that a company with such great vision has emerged from a year off with nothing to show for it but extra-pretty lighting. I figured on *Age of Empires III* and *Civilization IV* being retreads. I would have bet my house on *Quake IV* emerging as little more than the second coming of *DOOM 3*. But I was expecting more from Valve. ■

MODSQUADS



1 We Sold Our Souls For Rock and Roll

Well, not really. But SoulKeeper still isn't your typical total conversion for *Unreal Tournament 2004*. Where most modders stick very closely to the goth/android/spaceman template and the crazed combat that made Epic Games oodles of dineros, HELM Systems does a Tolkien and gives us deathmatch with dragons and a fantasy backstory about the depredations of an evil monster called the SoulKeeper. All of the multiplayer-only action takes place with stock races and character classes like the undead and wizards on a traditional fantasy world called Gerindak. Combat features everything from melee clashes between sword-wielding lunks in armor to wizards tossing spells at one another across lush, elf-friendly valleys. There are some nifty gimmicks, too, including the ability to ride or fly into battle atop horses and dragons, and spellcasting by drawing on the screen a la *Arx Fatalis*. The first public release, a 777MB extravaganza launched at the end of October, is remarkably polished visually, with loads of bloom effects and great maps settings like lush summer fields near castles, wintry forests, and spooky crypts. So far, though, there aren't that many people playing, which is a real shame because this is one mod that deserves attention. (Note to HELM Systems—look into adding bot support, please.)

thesoulkeeper.helm-systems.com/soulkeeper/

2 Red Alert!

This is the *Quake II* engine? Why did I waste all that money on a 6800 GT? COR Entertainment claims that its standalone CodeRED: Alien Arena 2006 is based on technology pioneered by the eight-year-old id Software classic, but you'd never know it from playing this great-looking shooter. And in addition to extremely colorful, surreal settings like lava planets and intergalactic factories (with modern visual amenities like reflective water and vertex lighting), and alien adversaries straight out of *Mars*

Attacks! this latest expansion to the CodeRED family of games comes packed with options. The zip may weigh in at just 151MB, but it includes 25 levels, five modes of play (including the all-new Deathball extreme-sport option), nine characters, eight weapons, and fully configurable bots. In short, it's astounding that this game is free.

thesoulkeeper.helm-systems.com/soulkeeper/

3 Get Some Sun. Shoot Some Trigen Goons

For such a popular game, *Far Cry* hasn't been a big hit with modders. Zoetic Games is hoping to start changing that with *The Cerebrus Protocols*, a single-player mod set during the events of the original game. You'll play Bruce Murphy, a Trigen test subject who escapes his captors during a power blackout and must uncover the mysteries of the (dum-dum-DUM!) Cerebrus Protocols. Gameplay should resemble *Far Cry*, with Murphy going up against the same Trigen thugs that turned Jack Carver's tropical paradise into a slice of hell for a little while. Zoetic is taking a "when it's done" approach to the release date, although progress was reported to be at the 50% mark when we went to press. There are certainly a lot of good-looking screens on the website to support this claim, so expect to head back to the tropics sometime early in 2006. cerebrusprotocol.com

Everything Old is New



Old games never die; they just get remade with better graphics and gameplay. And in many cases, you don't even need to pay for them. Fire up those download managers and take a trip down memory lane. BY TRACY BAKER

Remember that teacher you had a crush on in the sixth grade? Remember the time, about 20 years later, when you dug up your old class picture from that year and wondered what in the hell you were thinking?

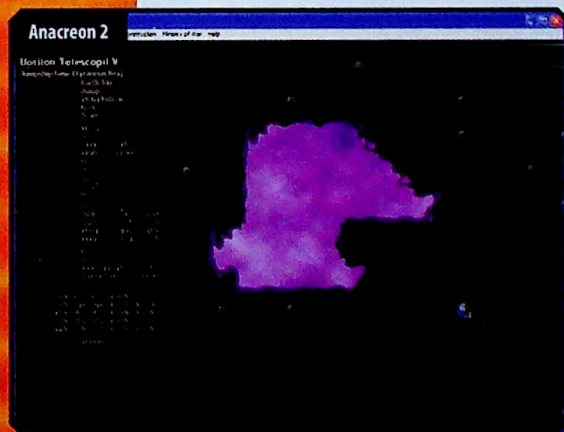
It's sort of the same way with old-school gaming. When you load up those delectable classics of the past, they tend to look and play much worse than your memory would lead you to believe. Wouldn't it be great to have access to those good old games, only with better graphics and gameplay?

We've scoured the Web for updated oldies that still hold up well today, and gone one better—everything here is free. Fire up those download managers and take a trip down memory lane.

Love Empire and Civilization?

Anacreon 2 neurohack.com/anacreon

Anacreon is an ancient DOS game of galactic conquest that is largely overlooked because of its awful graphics. This free sequel gives the game a high-resolution facelift, a modern interface, and makes the game even bigger and better. Most surprisingly, it's compatible with nearly all of the scenarios from the earlier edition, making it a real treat for fans of the original.



C-Evo c-evo.org

For those who consider *Civilization III* a misstep for the series, *C-Evo* expands on *Civ II* without messing too much with the familiar formula. The open AI system is also a plus, as many fans have used it to create a variety of AI "templates" that all play much differently from one another.



Soft spot for Star Control?

Gate 88 queasygames.com/gate88

Asteroids meets real-time-strategy in this strange hybrid that looks better in motion than screenshots suggest. Build and defend your base as you try to destroy enemy units and installations, all using the top-down, spin-and-shoot gameplay arcade junkies wasted countless quarters on in the 80s.

The Ur-Quan Masters sc2.sourceforge.net

If you liked *Star Control 2* (and who didn't) you'll love *The Ur-Quan Masters*. It's the same game, only better, and it actually works with modern hardware and operating systems. Be sure to check out the optional Remix packages, which add a ton of great music.

Nethack fan in need of a fix?

DOOM: The Roguelike

chaos.magma-net.pl/doom

Top-down, turn-based *DOOM* with ASCII graphics? It works better than you'd think, and does a great job of recreating the pressure from the seminal first-person shooter. The latest version even includes all of the sound effects and music from the original game.

IVAN (Iter Vehemens ad Necum)

ivan.sourceforge.net

The full name of this game translates to "Violent Road to Death," and fans of tough Roguelikes will soon find out why. Colorful graphics make this game prettier than most games in this genre, but the gameplay is just as brutally ugly.

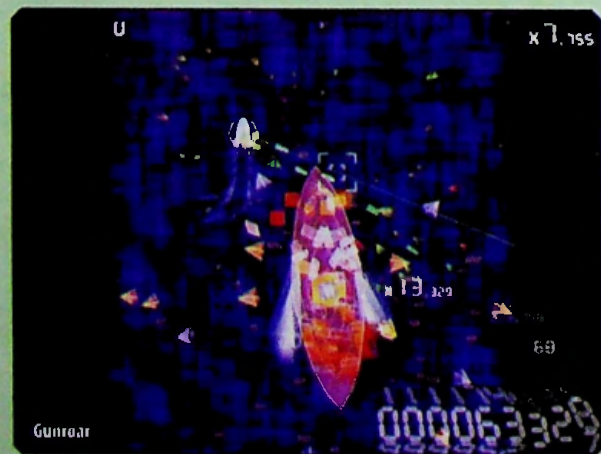


Miss Asteroids?

Gunroar

asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/windows/gr_e.html

Gunroar is *Asteroids* on steroids, and speed, with a vertical shooter element thrown in for good measure. The gameplay is just as intense as the colorful, abstract graphics, and there are several control options to accommodate you regardless of your hardware.



Tumiki Fighters

asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/windows/tf_e.html

This is another oddity from ABA Games, and is arguably the weirdest shmup of all time. Starting off in a nimble abstraction of a prop plane you shoot up foes and then grab the pieces so they stick to your ship, shielding you from damage. It's a bizarre concept that works surprisingly well.

Pining for puzzles?

Watomic

watomic.sourceforge.net

WAtomic is a remake of a remake, and it's obvious from the gameplay why fans keep updating this to run and look good on modern hardware. This is a pure logic puzzle where you move atoms around a map, Sokoban-style, to line them up into molecules. The puzzles are a perfect blend of interesting and devious.

FreeDroid

freedroid.sourceforge.net

OK, it can be argued that this is more action game than puzzle game, but this remake of the incredible *Paradroid* tests both your reflexes and your gray matter. The same team that did this also made an RPG that incorporates elements from *Paradroid*, so be sure to check that out as well.

Groggnard on a budget?

WinSPMBT

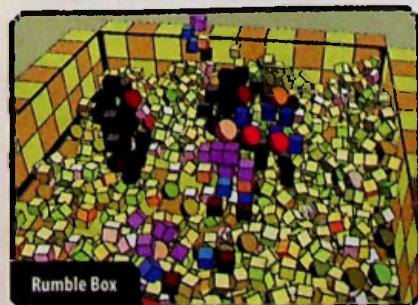
shrapnelgames.com/SPCamo/wSPMBT

Steel Panthers: Main Battle Tank never achieved the following that the original WWII-based *Steel Panthers* enjoyed, but it's a great game in its own right. It focuses on more modern military hardware, and Shrapnel Games recently updated the entire game so it works using a Windows interface instead of the clunky DOS one and plays great on modern hardware. The for-pay version offers support for higher resolutions and a few other goodies, but you can get about 90% of that functionality for free using this downloadable version.

The Ardennes Offensive

ssgus.com/ardennes-download.htm

SSG's *The Ardennes Offensive* is perhaps the best Battle of the Bulge game ever released for the PC. The company was working on an improved engine for the next



Fondly remember Panzer General?

People's Tactics

peoplestactics.com

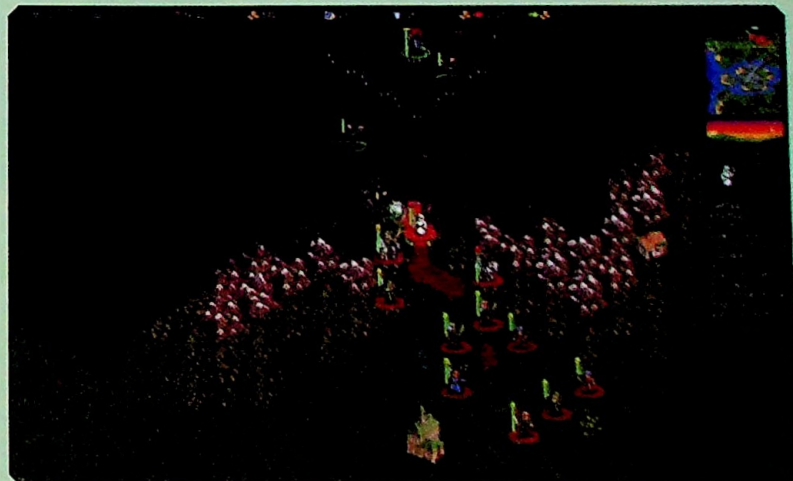
Whether you want to look at it as *Panzer General* lite or *Empire* extreme, *People's Tactics* is a great entry in this genre and looks better than either of those games. There are tons of units to play with, and it also factors in elements like entrenchment and officers with varying abilities.



Battle for Wesnoth

wesnoth.org

This turn-based fantasy game isn't quite as brilliant as *Fantasy General*, but it's much tougher and looks great. A number of campaigns are available, as is a robust editor for creating your own content.



game in the series, *Korsun Pocket*, but was never able to sell the improved version. Fortunately for us they decided to give it away for free, and it's a perfect introduction to this terrific series of medium-complexity wargames.

Ready to Rumble?

Rumble Box

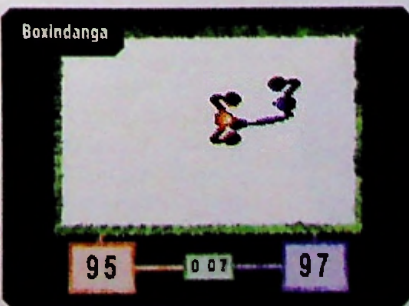
phackett.com/rumblebox

Rumble Box evokes memories of classics like *4D Boxing* and *Ballz 3D*, but obviously brings its own unique twist to the brawler genre. Fighters are blocks that shatter when defeated and the pieces accumulate to create an ever-changing arena of carnage.

Boxindanga

usuarios.lycos.es/exepotes/juegos/boxindanga/plantilla_ut.htm

Remember *Boxing* on the Atari 2600? This is it, but for your PC. They've spruced up the graphics a wee bit, but this is still fisticuffs at its minimalist best. Dodge, weave, pound the opponent's nose—that's it. And that's all many of us need.



Small Town Blues

Liberty City Stories is an amazing technological showcase for the PSP, but makes the biggest series in gaming feel small BY STEVE BAUMAN



★ ★ ½

Genre Portable Murder Simulator Developer/Publisher Rockstar Games Platform PSP

Could it surprise anyone to discover that the PSP was created to be the portable *Grand Theft Auto* machine? Sony isn't stupid; it knows that the PS2 might as well be called the GTABox, since the series has single-handedly turned billions of kids into hooker-killing gangstas. And Sony consumers.

So *Liberty City Stories* finally shows up for the PSP and there is much rejoicing. Set in 1998, you're a budding thug named Toni Cipriani. As with *GTA III*, you end up doing work for and against the various warring gang factions in Liberty City. You even take missions from your mom. The storyline is told through the same well-done cutscenes seen in its bigger brothers, though it continues the series' trend of being coarser and more lewd than each previous installment with no narrative benefit.

As a technical showcase for the PSP, *Liberty City Stories* is astonishing. Somehow, Rockstar managed to compress the entire *GTA* experience onto this tiny screen. It even adds multiplayer, which hasn't been seen in the series since the first two, top-down PC games. Most of the game modes require more than two players, so you better have a lot of friends in the same room with PSPs (it only supports ad-hoc play).

Until we get "Grand Theft Auto Online," this is primarily a single-player experience. Compared to *San Andreas*, *Liberty City Stories* feels a bit like a direct to DVD movie sequel. The production values are lower (who are these voice actors?) and the licensed music is poor (who are these bands?). You battle frame rate issues despite

"Compared to *San Andreas*, *Liberty City Stories* feels a bit like a direct to DVD movie sequel."

there being less traffic, and fewer cops. The quality and difficulty of the missions are all over the map—early ones give you three- and four-star wanted levels to deal with, but with the small screen and low resolution, it's nearly impossible to see a "Pay N' Spray" or avoid spike traps. A game designed specifically for a smaller handheld screen wouldn't force you to spend most of your time squinting at pixels.

Aside from view distance issues, driving feels almost identical to its bigger brothers. But if aiming on the console *GTA* is annoying, doing it with the PSP analog nub is torture. It makes combat way too hard, assuming you can ac-





Scenes from the class struggle in Liberty City. It certainly looks like *Grand Theft Auto*. Only smaller.

usually track the person you're trying to kill thanks to a serious case of wayward camera syndrome.

These issues tend to make the game something of a chore to actually play. There's little doubt it's a good game. Rockstar can probably do these things in its sleep—though its competitors certainly can't—but the negatives make you wonder if anyone actually considered, even briefly and right before they were fired, if there was a good reason for a portable version of *GTA*. Consider that something like *Lumines* is the ideal type of game for a handheld system. There's no benefit to having giant blocks on your 50-inch TV, it's easier to reach that Zen state of puzzle game bliss with the closer proximity of the screen and a pair of headphones, and it's designed for 10-minute games while you're waiting to do something else that might involve contact with other humans. But *GTA* is designed for marathon sessions; you play *San Andreas* for hours at a time, not minutes. After a few hours with Liberty City, your PSP's batteries have bought the farm.

More importantly, *GTA* is all about large-

ness: expansive worlds, oversized characters, gratuitous sex and violence splayed across 50-inch TVs, and blaring from 5.1 sound systems. It's nice to revisit Liberty City, but it's so much less here, both figuratively and literally. The area is tiny compared to the enormous world of *San Andreas*. *Liberty City Stories* is without question the most grand and ambitious handheld game ever made, but it's far too small to successfully capture the *Grand Theft Auto* experience. ■



Trapt Tecmo/Mature/PS2 ★

It has an intriguing concept: spring elaborate, multi-part traps to slay your pursuers. The problem is that the game has too little of that and too much running around avoiding enemies. What could have been a grimly satisfying puzzler is instead a maze-less version of *Pac-Man*. The camera is fixed too high and too close to your character to see what you need to see. A thin tutorial and manual put you on a steep learning curve to unrefined gameplay. Since two can play at deliberate phonetic misspellings, to put it bluntly, *Trapt* sux. —Matthew Gallant



Through a Lens Darkly

The uneasy **Fatal Frame III: The Tormented** infuses the mundane with something strange and wonderful
BY TOM CHICK

★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Non-American horror

Developer/Publisher Tecmo ESRB Mature Platform PS2



Fatal Frame was doing Japanese horror when it was still just Japanese. The name is a reference to a different kind of headshot; instead of using a gun to shoot zombies, you're using a magical camera to shoot ghosts.

This means a couple of important things. Firstly, it lends the gameplay its RPG progression. The effectiveness of your shots, and whether you can quickly snap a picture of brief apparitions, score points that you spend to level up the camera. You can also use different types of film and kit it out with lenses with special powers.

It makes for a unique "weapon," but more importantly, gives *Fatal Frame* a unique feel. Most horror games are utterly carnal. Even the superb *Silent Hill* ultimately came down to using a lead pipe to pound on some wet fleshy thing. But *Fatal Frame* is about things you can't bludgeon to save ammo. And the camera gimmick forces you to take a good look. You center your view and wait until the last minute, until you can see the vacant whites of their eyes. In other games, you'd just as soon kill a monster as look at it. In *Fatal Frame*, it's one and the same.

What *Fatal Frame III* manages to accomplish much better

than the previous games is a vague sense of unease. Rather than plopping you into a haunted house for the duration, you're alternating between a tightly focused dream reality and a waking one. It's often a slow game, but it captures nicely the tension/release dynamic of good pacing, and it remains eerie even in the real world, from details like the wind through an open window blowing a curtain to a simple remark about the rain. It's unsettling when Rei goes into her dead fiancé's room to do research. Why doesn't she just move the bookshelf? Because that would be less creepy. And as the story progresses, it gets a



Don't forget the lens cap.

lot of mileage out of blurring the dream/waking line. You know that hallway you walk down to get to the dark-room to develop your film? The walk might not be as uneventful as it used to be. And this is what horror is all about: infusing the mundane with a strange unknown newness.

Three different playable characters break up the narrative this time, which is littered with Japanese trappings (quick, play *Fatal Frame III* before someone sets it in the Pacific Northwest), including some esoteric mythology and heroines in silly outfits. The actual story is as sad as it is malevolent. The premise is that bereaved people are being lured away from life, doomed by their own grief. It's a horror story with a moving human element. And at a time when games like *F.E.A.R.* and *DOOM III* are passed off as scary, it's nice to know that some developers still appreciate the meaning of the word. —Tom Chick

...and they're not selling cookies.



SOCOM III

Only FPS for PS2 = WTF?



Genre Late '90s shooter Developer Zipper Interactive
Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment America
ESRB Mature Platform PS2

If you only own a PlayStation 2, chances are you're not reading this magazine. For everyone else, *SOCOM III* is the absolute middle-of-the-road for first-person shooters. Combine *Counter-Strike* and *Battlefield 1942* with some ugly, shimmering, *Quake*-brown graphics, and you're there.

It's clear this is Sony's crown jewel online game. There are nearly fifty thousand people playing on weekends, most of them much better than you. If you want to break your mouse and keyboard habit, this is a good game to use because these folks will improve your dual stickmanship. The control is solid, the game speed is reasonably fast, and precision always beats a random spray of bullets.

As a single-player game, it's just like any other "good guys" vs. terrorists with bad AI game that you've ever played. Although

now they get vehicles (welcome to the 21st Century, guys), there's nothing that makes the SEALs more exciting than any other international counter-insurgency group. Weaponry is standard, but you can mix and match gear as you like for your missions, online or off. The maps are a highlight, featuring good design and organic terrain features conducive to sneaking around. You also blend in nicely with the muddy textures. Oftentimes, running players will hurtle by with no clue you're there. Managing sound is integral as footsteps easily give you away.

If this were on any other system, it just wouldn't be the juggernaut that it is on Sony's FPS-poor console. But middling single-player and me-too multiplayer simply don't seem to be a deterrent. It's like any flat stretch of road in the country, nice and smooth with some decent scenery that gets you where you have to go. That place is first-person shooting online on PS2, and *SOCOM III* is nirvana for those who have nothing else. For everyone else, it's an enigma. —David J. Long

[left] Heavy gunning from boats never gets tiresome. [below] Counter-Strike anyone?



Lost in Blue Konami/E10+/DS ★★★★★

Lost in Blue is an import of a Japanese series called *Survival Kids*. It's like *The Sims* stranded on a desert island, leaving all but the most important of their motive bars back home while they're huddling cold and hungry at the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. There's a sense of urgency as you struggle to stay alive, balancing the temptation to explore farther inland with the easy-to-find coconuts, clams, and seaweed on the beach. You eventually layer in touch-screen fishing, a furniture-building mini-game, raising chickens and maybe a goat, bow hunting, and an annoying maze. It's like the rise of civilization—from foraging to animal husbandry to videogame conventions—in a microcosm. It's at times annoying, but mostly just challenging, presenting American RPG players with a welcome, exciting, and unique new arc. —Tom Chick



Romancing Saga

For the love of the role-playing game



Genre Hyperencephalic High Fantasy
Developer/Publisher Square-Enix ESRB Teen
Platform PS2

Romancing Saga, contrary to what the title would have you believe, is neither particularly melodramatic nor epic, although it is most certainly a pleasant little console role-playing game of a faded breed: the non-linear exercise in character micro-management. Despite the Square pedigree and the monstrous noggins that typify the cast of characters, it has far more in common with the flawed, creative RPG titles of yesteryear than the interactive anime experiences of today.

Initially, it prompts you to pick one of eight characters as the first member of your party. Depending on the bobbleheaded hero chosen, you see a distinctly different view of *Saga*'s paper-thin plot and tackle the game's fifty-plus quests from a slightly adjusted perspective. As you move through the game's overhead map and traipse through the bizarrely unfiltered textures of its brightly surreal fairytale locales, you pick



Give these guys their cookie.

up a full roster of five fellows.

Managing this little party is where the core of the game's deep mechanics lie. To complete quests successfully, you not only need to rotate members in and out regularly, but you need to teach them specific non-battle proficiencies, which range from jumping and climbing skills to ore mining and trap spotting. More importantly, you have to keep close tabs on your party's formation as well as each of their individual fighting styles, skills and spells. It's the combination of specific classes, positions, and techniques that lead to the execution of combo attacks and "vortexes" (powerful multi-member assaults that'll flay your eyes as much as they murder your foes), which in turn lay the game's powerful boss opponents low.

If the above description suggests that you'll spend a great deal of time fighting, well, it's true. *Romancing Saga* is largely a game of combat management. Fortunately, the fights feature some of the best special effects work seen in a game this generation, and some of the monster designs are inspired. On top of all this, the game features a varied and well-orchestrated soundtrack.

To make it clear, this is not an RPG for the story *uber alles* crowd, but neither is it an exercise in complete inscrutability like producer Akitoshi Kawazu's previous exercise in



gamer alienation, *Unlimited Saga*. *Romancing Saga* is an RPG almost perfectly crafted for the fan who prefers to spend hours tweaking statistics and getting the pellets fast and furious as the ol' hamster wheel spins on into the night. —Douglas Erickson

Tony Hawk's American Wasteland

\$60 worth of rebellion



Genre Commoditized Counter-culture
Developer Neversoft **Publisher** Activision
ESRB Teen **Platform** GameCube, PS2, Xbox

This marks the fifth October in a row that has seen the release of a *Tony Hawk*. The trend lately has been to mask how corporate that is by selling the rebellion. *American Wasteland* certainly ups the



punk imagery ante over the mild extremeness of *Underground*.

But that's pretty much all it delivers. There are a few new skating moves, and some free-running and bicycling challenges. Once again, the ridiculous story mode tries to integrate skater culture with the goofball idea that performing a 10,000 point combo near something will make it fall over. Or make people like you. Making friends is pretty hardcore, maybe even sick. This time, the goal is for you and your fast friends to build the best skate park ever. It's a step up from pillow forts.

It's all tied together with a tolerable but uneven presentation. Some of the non-interactive interludes are presented in the "Comix" art style personified by Gilbert Shelton and R. Crumb, some with in-engine cutscenes, and some where it's obvious something was meant to be there but October arrived a little too soon. Then there are the moments when the scripting engine locks up or your skater disappears except for his arms and legs.

Zoo Tycoon DS THQ/Everyone/DS ★

Look closely. Is that a gazelle or a lion? Are those kangaroos or cougars? Not that it matters, because you can't squint at the screen too long before you have to tap around a bunch of tiny buttons and half-point font on the touchscreen, futzing with its artless interface. And for some reason, you can only have one zoo saved. Want to take a break from your sandbox and try a scenario? It's time to play Sophie's choice with your meticulously assembled zoos. This is all a terrible disservice to what should have been a charming port of a charming game. Instead, it's a stark reminder not to take for granted all the clever inventive titles on the Nintendo DS, because it could be so much worse. —TC



The rest-free mode and online play aren't anything new, although it's nice to see Xbox Live finally supported. The main difference is that you're in a pseudo-L.A. environment of fairly tiny areas separated by long tunnels to allow the entire (still fairly tiny) city to be streamed instead of separated by loading screens. All told, it's no big loss if you decide to give *Tony Hawk* a rest for a year. Maybe Activision should take the same advice.

—Matthew Gallant

SSX On Tour

Dear Tricky, we miss you

★ 1/2

Genre Downhill racer **Developer/Publisher** EA
ESRB Teen **Platform** Gamecube, PS2, Xbox

As soon as you see the interface that looks like it was torn from the pages of a demented snowboarder's notebook, you know *SSX On Tour* is different. The problem is that most of the time it isn't different in a better way.

At its peak, *On Tour* is the best *SSX* yet. "This is freakin' awesome!" your mind screams as you plunge hundreds of feet down the side of a dam, chain together an apparent eternity of grinds, or soar off the

Cool running.



beaten path onto a hidden shortcut. Then that thought evaporates with the force of an A-bomb against an iceberg as you slam into a tree, a skier, some slowpoke in an inner tube, or one of the hundreds of other obstacles littering the slopes. Then there are the events that are easier if you slow down to a crawl. Note to EA: We want to go faster, always.

At least they carried over the option from *SSX3* to seamlessly run down the entire mountain—which takes up to 20 minutes—or test out any individual track. A lot of the events can be completed in a few minutes, so it's nice to be able to get a better feel for full track layouts before partici-

pating in the thrilling races. Tricks are easier than ever to pull off, but saving up the huge sums needed to unlock the best ones—not to mention the best boards and skis—is a chore. The limited number of initial character types is a step backward from EA's Sports other Big titles, and the later customization you can buy is entirely superfluous.

Taken individually all of these changes from the previous games are as insignificant as snowflakes. Collectively, they're an avalanche that stifles an otherwise great game. —Tracy Baker

Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance

No relation to any Pool, living or dead

★★★★

Genre Classic Mechanics, Strategic Epics
Developer Intelligent Systems **Publisher** Nintendo
ESRB Teen **Platform** GameCube

When bringing *Fire Emblem* from the handheld to the home, you'd think Nintendo would introduce some changes to take advantage of the extra power. Not so. Despite nicely rendered cutscenes, it's still very much living in a 2D megabit world, with only superficial use of its new 3D gigabyte digs. Luckily, it has that challenging, supremely polished, turn-based gameplay to fall back on.

It's underwhelming that the series' trademark one-on-one fights are still abstracted to you-swing/they-swing animations, and your axe-wielding paladin still always performs the same animation (critical hits excepted). That it's now all in 3D hardly feels special at all. Other handheld throwbacks include the Kansas flat battlefields, and dialogue delivered by character portraits whose animation consists of the odd blink. Fair enough, this stuff is part of the series' look and feel.

But you just can't understate the draw of the nuanced tactical gameplay, combined with a strategic layer of managing your team's development. While some tweaks seem unnecessary, or even broken, some are

You always wanted a career in snow business.





very welcome. The overall game mechanics are improved over the already lofty level of its classic predecessors on the Gameboy. Most appreciated are two new concepts: earning bonus experience for adeptly completing missions, and the ability between missions to increase support levels (bonuses for two characters being near each other during a fight). This makes the decision-making of how to develop your team less reliant on pulling off tactical shenanigans.

But it's not hard to find fault with the new

Ratchet Deadlocked

Sony/Teen/PS2 ★★½

There's nothing particularly wrong with being in a rut when it's a great one. And that's what the *Ratchet & Clank* series has furrowed for itself in the platformer genre. But *Deadlocked* rolls along that rut with all the creative power of a marble in a groove. You get a bunch of combat missions that really can't be bothered with any sort of narrative beyond letting you meticulously tweak your weapons. Frankly, given the bad writing in the last few games, that's just fine. But it's disappointing to see so much streamlined out of the series: no Clank puzzles, no giant Clank, no globe levels, no hacking mini-games, no expansive collecting worlds. Instead, you get thorough and hearty multiplayer support. Nifty, sure, but hardly the stuff that made *Ratchet & Clank Ratchet & Clank*. —Tom Chick



biorhythm and skill systems. It's tedious looking through your list of characters to see what kind of day everyone is having. Skills, which provide many unique character customization options, are learned from rare items that are consumed. Furthermore, the skill disappears forever if you drop it to make room for another. But unlike the permadeath, in which someone who dies stays dead, the punishment doesn't fit the

crime. Sort of like the production values don't fit the platform. —Matthew Gallant

Soul Calibur III

The last great fighting game of this generation

★★★★½

Genre Quaintly Misspelled
Developer/Publisher Namco
ESRB Teen Platform PS2



If *Soul Calibur III* hasn't had the same fever-pitched hype surrounding it as its massively popular predecessor, *Soul Calibur II*, chalk that up to its PlayStation 2 exclusivity. This time around, Namco's pyrotechnic crossed-steel fighting epic makes its appearance only on Sony's aging platform, although the end result would be a top-tier title on any of the current-gen consoles.

Despite a mild facelift, the previous title in

the series felt a bit half-assed in terms of content. This is not true of *Soul Calibur III*. Besides the three new characters—as well as twenty-plus returning ones—the disc is packed with loads of new single-player modes and one of the most exhaustive character creation systems ever put into a fighting game. Seventeen weapon styles, ranging from the usually exotic to the utterly original are available for your homemade gladiator, and there's well-on several hundred bits of gear to kit him or her out with.

On top of all that, there's a sort of half-cocked RTS mode that, while polished and lengthy, plays like the halfwit cousin of Sega's classic *Dragon Force*. The single-player AI in the "Tales of the Soul" mode redefines cheap, and some of the extra "Soul Arena" modes are frivolous. The amount of stuff to unlock—including silly fan service tchotchkes—is daunting.

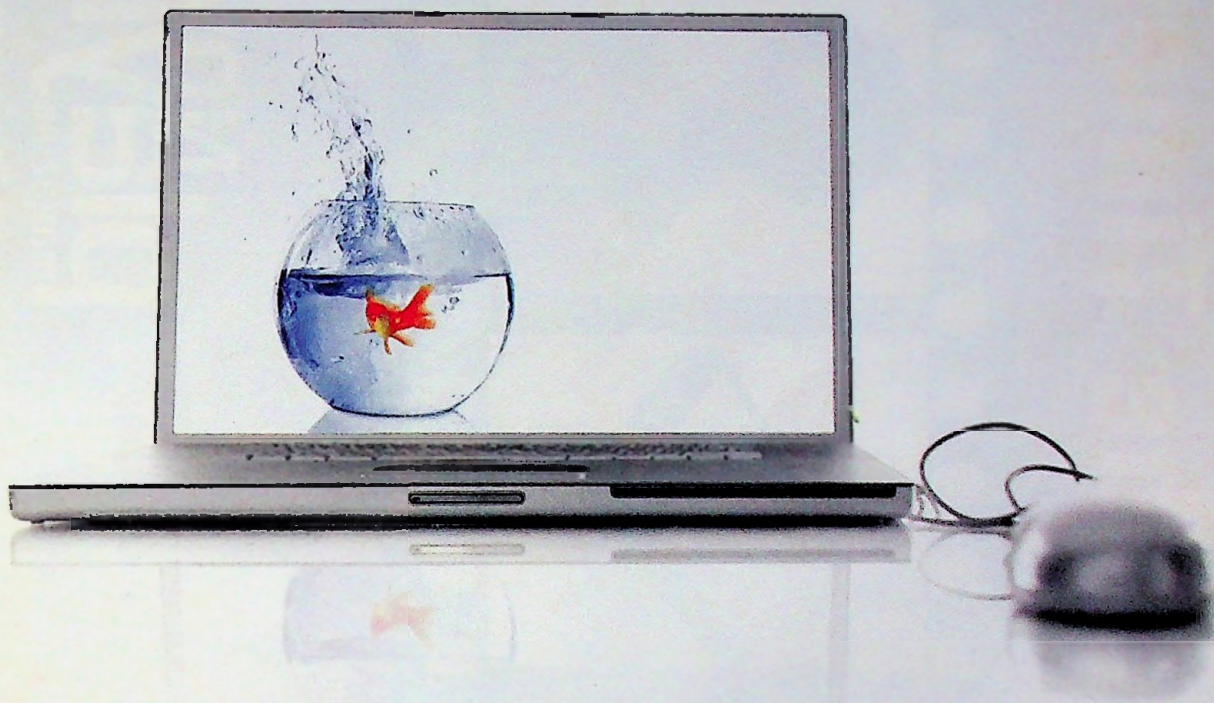
All that gravy is nice, but in the end, it's the fighting engine that matters, and *Soul Calibur III* adds a lot of changes to the core mechanics. The pace has been sped up significantly, and new hit-frame timing techniques raise the skill ceiling up to *Virtua Fighter* levels. Character move sets have been changed up drastically, and a few badly needed nerfs were handed out to folks like Nightmare, former friend of button-slapping newbies everywhere. That said, if you don't care about all the fighting game geek stuff, the game's jaw-dropping stage designs, flawless character animation, and deftly-scored orchestral soundtrack tweak your pulse to jackhammer levels.

The stage of history may only be set on the PS2 this time, but what a way to close out the generation with a punch. —Douglas Erickson



A game that isn't afraid of the homoerotic undertone of two fruitily dressed men poking long things at each other.

Goliath, Meet David.

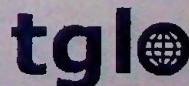


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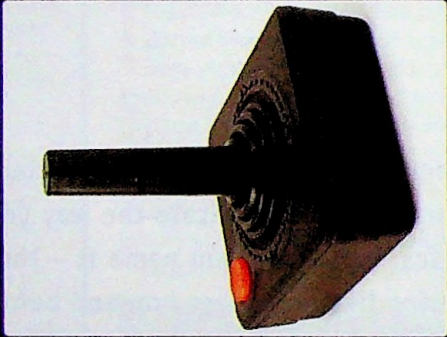


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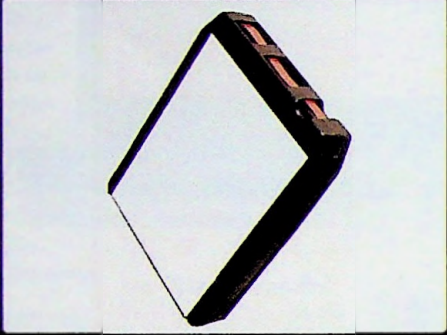


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applied game theory BY HENRY JENKINS AND KURT SQUIRE

Arrested Development

The fallout over violent game laws, and how to pro-actively deal with the issue

Thanks to the public outrage over the Hot Coffee mod for *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, both California and Michigan recently passed laws levying fines for retailers who sell games with violent content to minors. The fines are substantial; in the case of Michigan, first offenses can go as high as \$5000 and 3rd time offenses as high as \$40,000 with a possibility for 93 days in jail. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) and the Video Software Dealers Association (VSDA) are challenging the constitutionality of these laws, and they will be overturned. But for the moment, it's bad news.

Arnold Schwarzenegger signing this long represents more than just a great moment in political irony; many worry that major retailers such as Best Buy and Wal-Mart will stop carrying M-rated games rather than card underage consumers. These two states may effectively determine what games get made in the short term, given what a large portion of the games market are represented by these retailers and the unlikelihood that the chains will tailor their policies to specific states. Developers will be pushed to make only games targeting teens and children, the only ones with a clear path to the market.

Some parents might welcome the absence of games with intense violence, but this would impact not just shooters but also the ability of games to depict war or terrorism. Imagine trying to write the great American novel without being able to address violent and sexual themes, and you see the problem here. We might describe it as a case of arrested development.

A moral reformer speaking at the Future Play conference in October argued that even if games do not contribute to real world violence, the worst thing that happens from a law banning minors' access to them is that kids will have to spend more time playing outside. This argument can only be made in a context where most people assume games have no real cultural value. Imagine making such an argument about cinema.

Yet, in the eyes of many, games consist purely of violence (*DOOM*), sex (*Lara Croft*), and the combination of the two (*San Andreas*). This is why controversies around Hot Coffee or *Bully* are so damaging: They reaffirm the public's perception that the games industry is run by irresponsible adolescents run amuck or cigar chomping businessmen preying on our children's innocence. And industry spokespeople argue the negative—we're not as bad as you think—rather

than constructing the affirmative case for game's cultural and educational value of games.

In this political climate, both Democrats and Republicans are racing to take the strongest anti-gaming stance in the 2006 and 2008 elections. Sadly, so far the actual facts—no known link between media use and real world violence, decreases in violent crime among adolescents—are less important than ideological positions. At Future Play, media effects researcher Craig Anderson acknowledged that no serious researcher believes game playing will make an oth-



"We need to make the case for games rather than simply arguing against claims of harmful effects."

erwise normal kid into a sociopath, but this has not stopped many reformers and politicians from using his more cautious research findings, which show small increases in self-reported feelings of aggression in a laboratory setting, to make precisely that claim. A new generation of media scholars like Dmitri Williams doing longitudinal studies of gamers are finding no increase in aggressive behavior, but in all likelihood they will be accused of being in bed with the industry, while no one looks very closely at the sources of funding for media effects research. As Gabe from *Penny Arcade* points out, perhaps gamers have been lucky to have some-

one as inept as Jack Thompson, who even moral reformers are beginning to disassociate with, playing the role of crusading lawyer.

So, what can we gamers and free expression advocates do? In our last two columns, we've argued that perhaps we can be more cautious about supporting companies like Rockstar, who fan the flames of controversy to sell more titles. We also can support innovation with our wallets, showing that there are demands for more diverse kinds of games. For their part, the *Penny Arcade* folks have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for charities, even covering Thompson on his failed promise to donate \$10,000 to charity if someone made a mod of *GTA* where parents could frag game designers.

For our part, we have been working over the past several years helping parents, librarians, and policy makers understand the complexity and social significance of gaming. Much of this work has been through The Education Arcade, our effort to build and promote educational games. We need to make the case for games rather than simply arguing against claims of harmful effects. But for that case to be credible, the industry has to create games that live up to the full potential of the medium.

Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire are co-directors of The Education Arcade, which is based at MIT and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. More information on the program can be found at educationarcade.org

random incoherence BY KELLY WAND

There Is No 'I' in 'Guild'

In which we consider the question of why it's unquestioningly considered better to play with others than with oneself

"The race of men, while sheep in credulity, are wolves for conformity." —Carl Van Doren

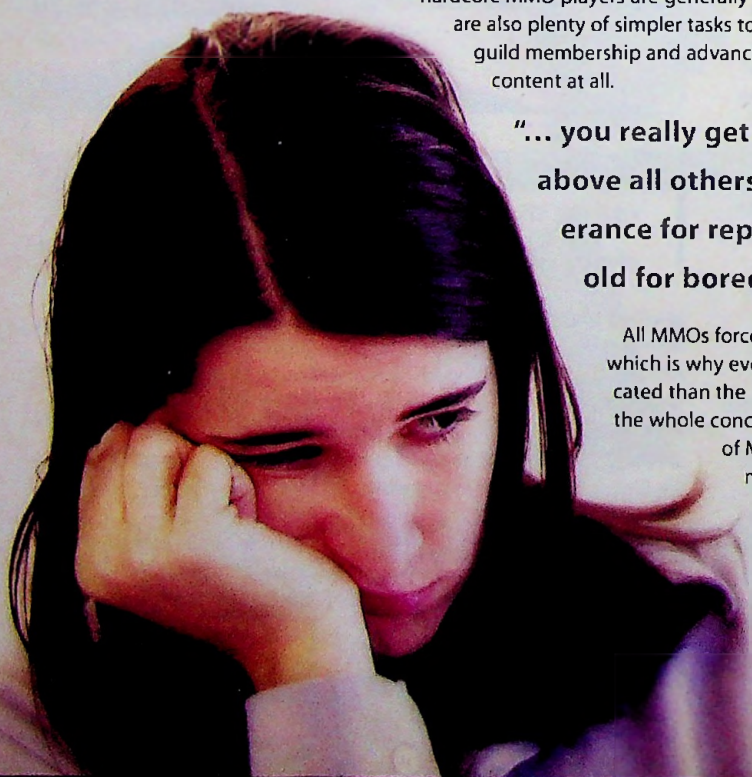
In *World of Warcraft*, it's rare to find any characters above level 50 who don't belong to a guild. Their mere presence rates suspicion, curious sniffs, sometimes even a little envy. Who are these mavericks, and who do they think they're kidding? Lone wolves too cool for school, or outcasts unclear? Considering how much *WoW* favors cooperation, there can't be many alternatives, since you're no one in an MMO unless you belong to a guild/clan/supergroup/fraternity. There's a glass ceiling beyond which anti-social climbers need not apply. Sorry, buddy, you don't work unless you're in the union. The most hardcore MMO players are generally defined by how organized their guild is. Although there are also plenty of simpler tasks to keep more casual gamers occupied as long as possible, guild membership and advanced rank therein are mandatory to enjoy any endgame content at all.

"... you really get ahead by nurturing certain qualities above all others: brute endurance, an inhuman tolerance for repetition, and a stratospheric threshold for boredom."

All MMOs force their subscriber base to eventually work in groups, which is why every incoming MMO feels progressively more domesticated than the last. But they're community-minded by definition. That's the whole concept behind online games. Life likes other life. The lesson of MMOs is that people will pay extra to interact with as many other people as possible, and the best framework to expedite this is guilds.

But guilds suck for two reasons:

1. Most people suck. That's what friends are for, buffers to scare off the chaff. And though you meet cool people in an MMO, the game



mechanics aren't exactly rigged to favor qualities desirable in a companion. You don't level up by being smart, charismatic, or even industrious. All those traits can help, but you really get ahead by nurturing certain qualities above all others: brute endurance; an inhuman tolerance for repetition; and a stratospheric threshold for boredom. Qualities, in other words, that are great to have in a file clerk, cashier, or stripper, but not in someone you want to spend most of your days with.

In theory, you're supposed to play with your real-life friends, but it's not that easy. Rare is the MMO coterie where everyone plays at similar speeds and skill levels. So, you take up with strangers. Every time you form a group, which itself can take from minutes to hours, it's a crap shoot. The endgame bosses are so extreme, even tightly-knit core groups have to join with other possibly uncool lame-ly-knit core groups, all for a much, much lower chance of winning loot that might very well get yanked out from under them.

It's hours of forced cooperation, all for the payoff of heated competition in the form of random die rolls. And for many, "cooperation" in an MMO instance often means sitting against a wall as a cog in a raid party's third-string, sanctioned with the exalted task of making sure the second-string healers maintain enough mana to keep the second-string mages buffed for the next ten minutes.

Even the die roll's being steadily phased out for more bureaucratic methods like "DKPs," or "Dragon Kill Points." This is a recordkeeping system that varies in details from guild to guild but generally rewards players based on attendance with points (tracked by a fallible human agency) they can then spend bidding on items that drop. In theory, such a system would seem to leave casual players out in the cold, but DKP proponents argue that those with tons of points tend to be miserly with them, waiting for that one legendary Water Heater of Cosmic Shimmeringness +0 while leaving plenty of lesser crap lying around for the lickspittles to sweep up along the way. Unless, of course, they happen to want it for their mule, or they just lost an epic bidding war and will now take anything to recoup, or they're a farmer. In short, the potential for enmity literally dwarfs how anyone in the group feels towards their arbitrarily designed racial enemies. Which brings us to...

2. Guilds were usually the "enemy" in most fantasy literature, a genre that celebrates iconoclasts, jackanapeses, ronin, those who fought the Power, be-headed the tyrants, or died trying. Conan, Elric, Thor, the Gray Mouser, Cugel, Tyrion, even Gandalf and Aragorn were exiles who attained great power and wisdom in solitude. Where's the MMO version of Anasurimbor Kellhus, Kane, Titus Groan, Maal Dweb, Sir Able of the High Heart, Gwydion, or Groo? Where are the instances for solo players, the treasures that can be obtained through guile, gambling, forgery, or assassination?

Obviously, games and books are different creatures. Demanding equal time for misanthropes in an MMO is as silly as angrily writing fantasy novelists to demand they lose the words and just stick to filling the pages with health bars and experience point bubbles like Robert Jordan and Terry Goodkind do.

Misanthropes worth their salt, of course, won't be caught dead near an MMO anyway. The games may bill themselves as recreational escape from real-life hassles, but they also serve as grim reminders of real life's worst aspects: the compromises, the waiting, the commute, the crowds, the gyps, the babble. But minus the physical exercise.

Based on what constitutes the bulk of the chat text in the big urban centers like Orgrimmar and Ironforge, most MMO players seem perfectly satisfied to exhibit the demeanor of bankers rather than swashbucklers: impatient of spectacle, and hungry for the ledgers.

Next month: Back by popular demand, "61" Simple Steps to Papaya-Scented RAM (now with more steps per rind!)

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(The Purely Speculative)

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What's hot in next year's lineup! We're not sure, but we're offering our best guesses anyway. So tune in for a year's worth of hype in a single article!

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three finger salute BY TOM CHICK

Two for Lunch

When worlds collide

Hello, Hollywood. Thanks for meeting with me. I know you've been busy lately, what with *Spy Hunter*, *Silent Hill*, *Alice*, *Hitman*, *Area 51*, the next *Resident Evil* and such. So I'll get right to the point.

I've just seen your movie, *DOOM*. Okay, actually, I haven't seen it personally. I don't generally go to movies that open at \$15 million unless they're based on a cancelled Joss Whedon show. But I did see your movies *Tomb Raider*, *Wing Commander*, and *Mario Brothers* with Bob Hoskins and John Leguizamo. I'm a little concerned at some of the choices you're making, so I thought I'd offer you a bit of friendly advice. Do you have a moment?

Will you be eating? I recommend the ahi tuna salad.

If you're going to make a movie from a game, I think you need to—bear with me on this—I think you need to ignore the game. Don't

That's the thing about me. I can't stay away. You know that about me, don't you? That's why you make these movies, isn't it? Because I'm going to be there no matter what you do. Frankly, that's why I think you should ignore the game and just make a good movie aimed at everyone except me. If not that, then at least try to make it a non-bad movie.

Now that Uwe Boll fellow, he's a whole other story. No, no, I know, you can't be held accountable for him. Those Germans, believe me, I know. I tried to watch a Fassbinder film once! But, seriously, I kid. Cinematic visionary, auteur, all that stuff. No, I meant Fassbinder.

But Uwe does have the right idea. Ignore the game and make the movie you want to make. Everybody wins if it's not a bad movie, and that's where Uwe gets hung up. No, not you, Uwe. You get hung up on bad movies sometimes, too, but I'm specifically talking about Uwe, not you. Him. Uwe Boll. Ha ha, who's on first? You're fun. We should lunch more often.

"If you're going to make a movie from a game, I think you need to ignore the game."



bother with anything but the title, maybe a character's name or something like that for brand recognition. I say this mainly because games make for awful movies. They're completely different kinds of experiences. There's no place in movies for drag selecting, circle strafing, Zerg rushes, double jumping, ninja looting, or anything beyond sitting on my derriere and watching something someone else put together for me. Which is kind of like playing *Dungeon Siege*. Oh, right, you're not a gamer, so you wouldn't get that joke. Never mind. It's pretty old anyway.

That first person stuff in your *DOOM* movie, you know, the part at the end where the audience is watching the guy running around with the gun as if we were playing the game? Yeah, okay, that's funny. But I think I would have rather had better third-person parts. What's that? I said I didn't see it? Okay, you got me. I went on opening night.

So, what I really want to say is this. When you see the guys working on the *Halo* movie, make sure they just let Pete Jackson do his thing. You call him "Pete," right? I mean, we have that, too. We call Sid "Sid," and everyone knows who we mean. Sid Meier. Come on, really? *Civilization*? *Pirates*? Umm, how about *Covert Action*? How is it you can know who American McGee is, but not Sid Meier?

Anyway, try to keep Microsoft and Bungie off Pete's back. We don't want a talking paper clip in the movie. But especially Bungie. Keep Bungie away from the *Halo* movie. Have you played *Halo 2*? I couldn't make heads nor tails of it after that *Little Shop of Horrors* plant showed up. To tell you the truth, they lost me long before they decided to end it without, you know, ending it. Let me tell you, those aren't the guys I want having creative control over any movie I'm going to see.

Are you going to finish that? And should we have desert? I hear they make a mean tiramisu here. Maybe we can split one. There's nothing wrong with that, is there? After all, you and I need to learn to share the same piece of pie. ■

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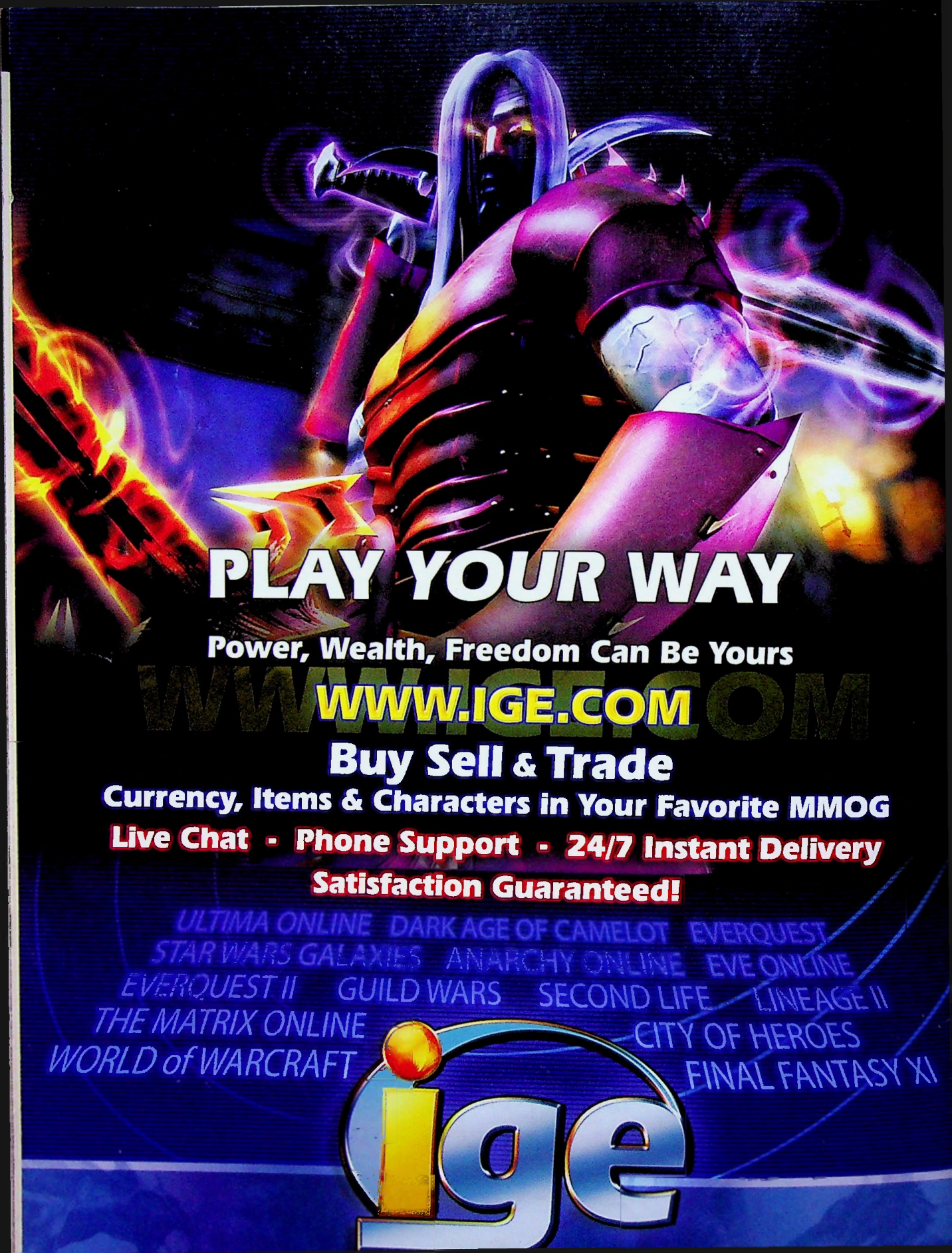
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